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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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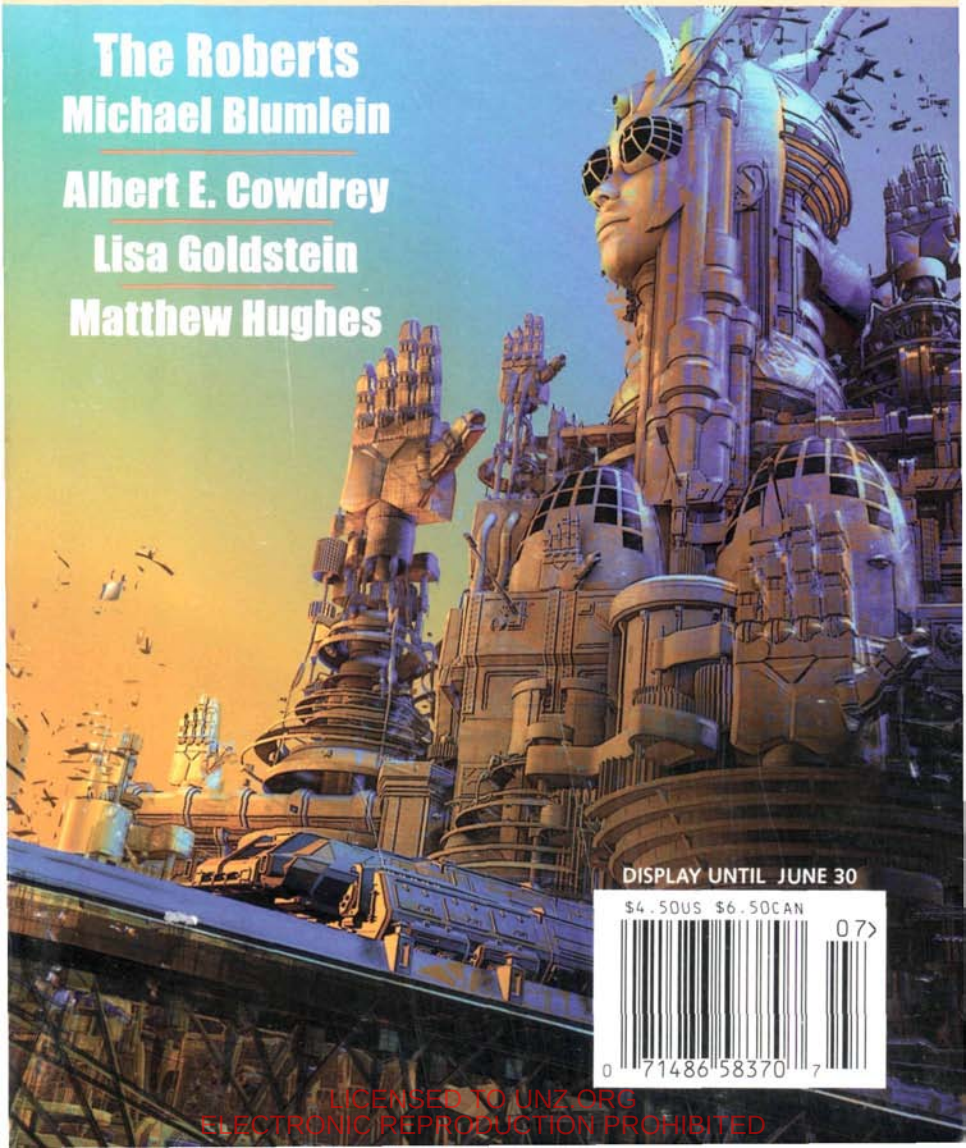

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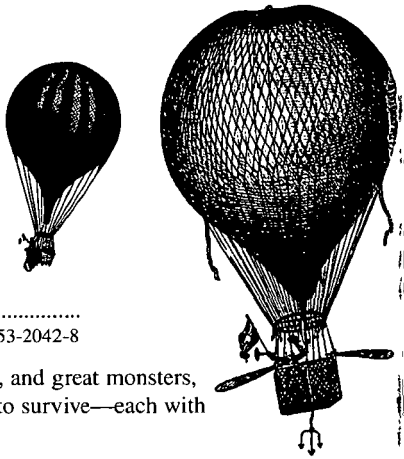

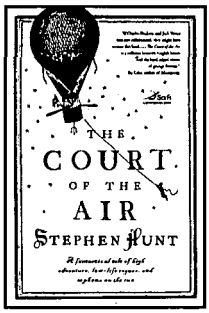

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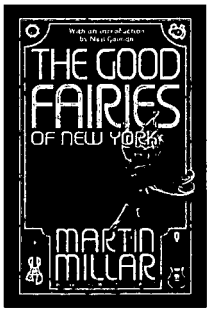

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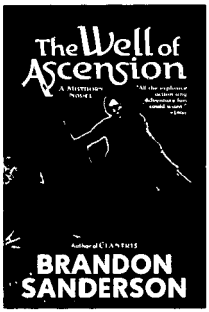

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July • 59th Year of Publication

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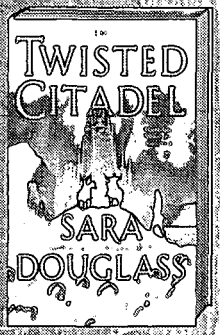

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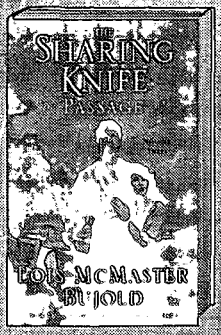

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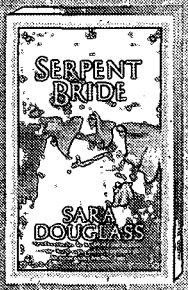

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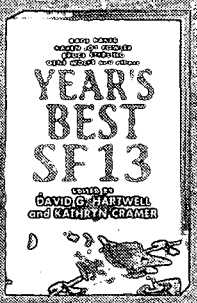

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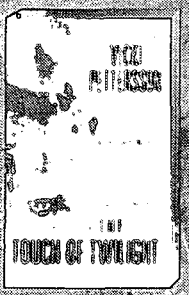

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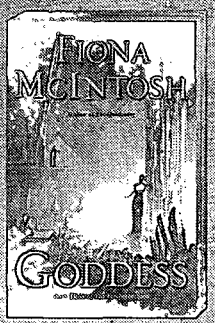

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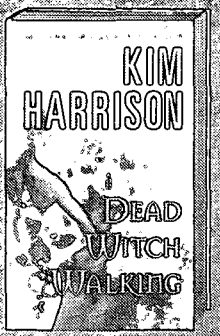

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Not only is he the foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth, but Henghis Hapthorn is also one of the most popular characters to grace our pages in recent years. Lately he has made himself scarce around here by habituating novels like The Spiral Labyrinth *and* Majestrum. *(This story, in fact, first appeared in the limited edition of* The Spiral Labyrinth.*) A new Hapthorn novel,* Hespira, *is due out in September.*

Mr. Hughes reports that his latest book is a stand-alone Archonate novel called Template *that should be available around the time this issue hits the stands.*

Fullbrim's Finding

By Matthew Hughes

DOLDAN FULLBRIM WAS A seeker after substance. His great misfortune — and, to a lesser extent, mine — was that he found it.

His obsession intersected my life in the person of his long-suffering spouse, Caddice, who came to me, bringing his voluminous research. "He has disappeared," she said, dumping stacks of recording media, bound journals and sketched diagrams onto my worktable. "You must find him."

I welcomed the assignment for two reasons. First, finding persons who had mysteriously stepped out of their daily lives, often never to be seen again, had long been a part of my profession, as the foremost freelance discriminator of Old Earth in our ancient planet's penultimate age.

Second, I had of late been much bound up in other activities, stemming from the impending cyclical readjustment of the universe, by which it would cease to be founded on rational cause-and-effect and would instead begin to operate by the rules of magic. The rapidly approaching cusp had harshly disrupted my formerly well-ordered existence and I was

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determined to get back to exercising my logical faculties for as long as they continued to reflect the reality around me.

The integrator that served as my assistant had undergone its own dislocations. For a time, it had been transmogrified into a creature called a grinnet, such as would have been a wizard's familiar in the previous age of magic. By its own choice, it was now once again a collection of components and systems, though there were subtle indications that the willfulness it had acquired during its flesh-and-blood sojourn had not been wholly eliminated.

I had met Fullbrim's type before. Substance-seekers were not unadmirable when the seeking was balanced by a dose of reasonableness, but they did become problematic when the urge to delve ever deeper was let to take precedence over life's other priorities. Fullbrim was of the latter sort, and his deepening obsession had gradually driven Caddice to erect a series of barriers within their relationship.

First, she had forbidden him to mention his preoccupations when the couple was in any social setting. Too many old friends had ceased to call, or had taken to crossing streets at oblique tangents, or developing a sudden consuming interest in the contents of shop windows, whenever Caddice and Doldan Fullbrim loomed in the offing.

Second, having stopped him from filling the ears of third parties with his findings and speculations, she forbade him to direct them at her own auditory apparatus except during the hour before dinner. But Doldan's continuing researches yielded more than enough material to fill the moments between the opening and closing chimes. Indeed, it seemed to Caddice that those moments stretched unnaturally long as he prattled enthusiastically about "fractal reinterpolations and quantum boojums."

"At least, I think that was what he was talking about," she told me, as we consulted in my workroom. "As we entered the last few minims of the hour, he would speak much faster and employ abbreviations of his own devising. He had so much to convey, he would say, and all of it so fascinating."

"To him," I said.

"Yes," she said, half stifling a sob, "though not to any other resident of Old Earth. Or at least none that he ever encountered."

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I offered her a second glass of the restorative cordial and she accepted. I waited until she had regained her composure, then encouraged her to continue. The rest of the story tumbled out: finally she had encouraged him to forgo the daily oral reports and instead to write a comprehensive report of his findings to date, with daily journal notes to keep her current. She promised to read them when leisure permitted.

"But, of course, it never did," I said.

"Not until he disappeared." She drained the lees of the second glass and I poured her another. When she had done away with half of it, she continued, "I've tried to make sense of it, but I become lost in every other paragraph. There are footnotes, some of which connect to endnotes that only lead me back to where I started." She indicated the sprawled materials on my work table. "Perhaps you can make sense of it."

I regarded the accumulated results of a life-long preoccupation. "It might be a better use of my time to solve the mystery of your spouse's disappearance," I suggested. "Tell me again what happened the last time you saw him."

She repeated what she had told me earlier. Doldan Fullbrim had burst from his study, his hair in disorder and an expression on his face that she described as "energized." He had not bothered to don any outerwear, even though it was a scheduled half-day for rain in Olkney, but had rushed out the door unhatted.

"And did he speak at all?" I said.

"He said, 'Ahah!'"

"'Ahah?'"

"'Ahah,'" she confirmed.

And then he was gone and she hadn't seen him for several days, nor had he communicated regarding his whereabouts or any forecast of his return. As time passed, Caddice Fullbrim had progressed from surprise to bemusement, then on to alarm and finally to dread. "He is not," she said, "the most worldly of men. He could easily fall afoul of those whose motives are base and whose methods are dire."

"Indeed?" I said. "Then we had better find him."

"There may be clues in his work."

"I will peruse them," I assured her, though I intended to use more direct methods to locate her strayed seeker. We negotiated a fee structure,

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a healthy advance with refreshers and expenses. Fortunately for all of us, the missing man had been the heir to a fortune so substantial that it would have been difficult to dissipate, even if the Fullbrims had not lived relatively modestly on its proceeds.

I saw her downstairs to her waiting cabriole and watched as it wafted her away. Back in my workroom, I instructed my assistant, "Make a search of Doldan Fullbrim's movements since the date in question."

"I have already done so," it replied. "He went directly from his home to the space port, booked passage for Greylag on a Graz Line passenger vessel, and was offworld within the hour."

"Was Greylag his true destination?" The world was one of the Foundational Domains. From there Fullbrim could have gone in many different directions.

"Unknown," said my integrator, "but he bought an open ticket."

An open ticket was a mode of travel favored by wanderers; Fullbrim could present it at the foot of any gangplank of a ship owned by any one of more than a dozen cooperating lines and receive preferred boarding.

"Hypothesis," I said, "he had discovered that there was something on Greylag, but it was a something that was likely to propel him on to some other destination. Else he would have bought a return ticket. Or a one-way, if he did not plan to return."

"Supportable," said my assistant. "A subsidiary hypothesis is that he has gone on to that other destination."

"Yes," I said, "and our best course is probably to follow him. Contact the *Gallivant* and tell it to provision for a lengthy voyage. Then alert the space port that we will be lifting off within the hour. In the meantime, I will survey these materials — " I indicated the stack of papers and charts — "and see what had our quarry so deeply engrossed."

Seated in the snugly comfortable salon of my ship, a mug of fragrantly steaming punge at my elbow, I again sought to draw a pattern from Doldan Fullbrim's researches. But no comprehensive shape emerged. "It obviously has to do with fundamentalities," I said. "He first put a lot of effort into investigating bell-curve distributions of naturally occurring phenomena. Then there was a period when he was concerned with the way that the atoms of which different types of matter are formed tend to attenuate

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at the edges of objects. Clearly, he was looking for underlying patterns, yet I find he drew no conclusions. Instead, he jumped over to a consideration of fractal geometries and the way that ostensibly straight lines and curved surfaces reduce themselves to tangled higgles-and-piggles when brought under close scrutiny."

"Indeed," said my assistant. Before leaving my lodgings, I had decanted it into a traveling armature made of a soft but sturdy material and shaped like a plump stole that I could wear around my neck. At the moment, however, it was resting on the salon's folding table.

Seeing that the integrator had nothing more to add, I went on, "And then, most lately, he was comparing the shapes and trajectories of several million galaxies. He had leaped from the micro to the macro in a single bound."

"And from there he made a further leap: from Old Earth to Greylag," said my assistant.

"What does it mean?"

"I suggest we put that question to Fullbrim when we find him."

It occurred to me that my integrator was not being of much use. When I gently suggested as much, its reply was equally unhelpful. It said, "You are looking for sense and structure in what is simply, and most likely, the evidence of mania."

"You think Fullbrim to be unbalanced?"

"It is not uncommon for an inhabitant of Old Earth to be seized by an obsession. It is the defining characteristic of the world's penultimate age."

It was an inarguable observation. The planet was rich in its supply of persons who niggled over philosophical minutiae or devoted themselves to mystic cults or needlessly rigorous political systems. Fullbrim might well be just another "full-bore," as the type was colloquially known.

"I wish my intuition had not gone off to live in a remote cottage," I said. My former intuitive faculty, now reified as a separate person named Osk Rievor, had not even acquired an integrator through which we could communicate while he pursued his own researches into the coming new age of magic. "I could use his insight, especially as to the meaning of this last cryptic entry in Fullbrim's journal."

"I took it for evidence of the impending breakdown," my assistant said, "that sent him flying to the space port."

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"It may be just that," I said, "or coming last as it does, it may be the clue that illuminates all the murk that comes before."

I regarded the five words, jaggedly scrawled across two pages of the journal in a more agitated hand than had set down the neatly arrayed paragraphs and tables that filled the rest of the substance seeker's notebooks. The entry read: "A lick and a promise," and was followed by no fewer than three exclamation points.

GREYLAG LAY some distance down The Spray, sufficiently far that we must pass through two whimsies and cross a great deal of normal space between them. I used the time to pore over Fullbrim's notes and had my assistant deconstruct them from various perspectives, in case some hermetic code underlay the discontinuities of the material. But we had made no more headway by the time we popped back into reality to find ourselves only three hours at moderate speed from the sphere of controlled space that surrounded the planet. Greylag grew in the forward screen until it revealed itself to be a cloudy world, much of it swathed in gray and white, though a constant ion flux from its star gave a pinkish coloration to the atmosphere over the poles.

We did not land, but orbited at a wide remove while my assistant contacted the Graz Line factor and inquired as to the movements of our quarry. "I am receiving no cooperation from the factor's integrator," it informed me.

"Connect me to the factor," I said.

An interval occurred while I regarded the image on my assistant's projected screen. It was the heraldic symbol of the Graz Line, a fanciful beast with broad wings and a rounded belly that led up to a long neck topped by a horned head. The features of the long-snouted face were set in a simper.

The interval extended. "Where is the factor?" I said.

"He is said to be engaged in important affairs," my assistant reported.

"As am I," I said. "Is there provision for an emergency connection?"

"Yes."

"Then make use of it."

"The factor's integrator requires to know the nature of the emergency."

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"Tell it that it is of an intensely private nature and that the factor will be annoyed — no, say angered — by his integrator's prying into affairs that do not concern it."

"You are being put through," my assistant said.

The Graz Line's beast disappeared and the face of a heavyset man now filled the screen, his hand wiping crumbs from his lips and chin. "Who are you? What is this emergency?"

"Emergency?" I said. "Your integrator must have misunderstood." I identified myself and stated my business.

"We do not divulge information on our passengers to every passing vagabond," the factor said. I saw his hand, still becrumbed, reaching to sever the connection.

Had we been on Old Earth I would have mentioned my connection to the Archon, but this far down The Spray, Filidor's name would have raised no sprouts, as the saying goes. Instead, I said, "Then you will have to explain your lack of diligence when the Graz Line's directors arrive to survey the ruins and decide who will carry the blame."

The hand stopped, the beetling brows drew down into a dark chevron. "Directors? Ruins? What?"

"Of course," I said, "it may be that Doldan Fullbrim has targeted some other enterprise for his latest devastating fraud. But then that company's directors will still want to have words with whoever facilitated the crime. For the record, what was your full name?"

"Fraud? What fraud?"

"I have already said too much," I said. "For all I know, you are yourself belly-deep in the conspiracy. I will disconnect and deal with your head office."

"Wait!"

Moments later, my assistant received Fullbrim's itinerary. "He has gone on to Mip, with a transfer to Far Grommsgrik."

I did not know the latter world. When my assistant had the *Gallivant*'s integrator pull up *Hobey's Guide to Lesser and Disregarded Worlds*, the place turned out to be a dry and rocky little orb on the outer edge of human-settled space, where The Spray met the Great Dark of the intergalactic gulf. "To Far Grommsgrik," I told the ship, and we left Greylag to its own concerns.

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* * *

Hobey's had little to say about Far Grommsgrik. After the usual statistical data on size, orbit and spin characteristics, and the composition of the world's atmosphere, the flow of information tailed off sharply. Under the heading of population, the listing confined itself to the single word: "sparse." The notation on the world's economy was even slimmer: "nil."

Heeding the paragraph on climate, I chose appropriate clothing, filling the pockets with several species of coinage, some emergency rations, and a compact weapon that could emit two types of focused energy or spit tiny darts that exploded once they decided they had penetrated deeply enough. I also put Fullbrim's research materials into a satchel. Finally, I draped my assistant over my neck and shoulders and said, "*Gallivant*, open the hatch."

Far Grommsgrik's axial tilt being almost nonexistent, the climate of the region in which I had touched down could not much worsen — which was a relief — but neither would it much improve, which would have been a depressing prospect had I intended to stay. I stepped down into a chill desert of dark rock and gray grit, flat in all directions except west, where an unimpressive sawtooth of naked peaks and crags interrupted the horizon. Between my ship and the mountains lay one of the planet's few settlements, a huddle of flat-roofed huts fashioned from the same rock that surrounded them. Apparently, on far Grommsgrik, any other building material must be brought from offworld.

I trudged toward the hamlet, my boots kicking up low clouds of dust that rapidly returned to the ground. Though small, the planet was dense; its gravity exhibited an unmistakable spirit of determination. Its day was also short and, as I had made planetfall after the pale sun that this barren rock orbited had already reached the zenith, night would soon descend.

I had been prepared to bargain for accommodation in whichever hut was the largest, but I was surprised to find that the settlement featured a rudimentary hostelry, identifiable by the words "The Inn" daubed in black paint above its low-linteled doorway. I pushed aside a curtain of heavy felt weighted with stones sewn into its lower edge and found myself in a bare room, its only furnishings a few chairs and tables made from piled-up flat stones, the seats softened by layers of the same felt that

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covered the doorway. By the light of a few dim lumens — there were no windows — I saw on the far side of the room a slab of waist-high stone, with just enough room behind it for a lean and sinewy man, narrow of shoulder and bald of crown. He regarded me impassively from eyes whose expression advertised that they had already seen as much of life as they cared to, and probably more than was good for their owner.

As I crossed to him he drained the contents of a small beaker that had been halfway to his lips when I pushed aside the felt. He shook slightly from the impact of whatever was in the cup, then set it down and picked up a large stoneware crock. Cradling it under one arm, he began to ladle a thick, cold gruel into a row of bowls that stood on the countertop. The receptacles appeared to have been ground from the same material that formed the walls, floor, and furniture. I performed a respectful salute, named myself, and asked if he was the proprietor of the establishment.

He replied, without pausing in his work, that he was the keeper and that his name was Froust. Then he said, "You'll be wanting to go up to the Epiphany. It's too late today, but you may stay here for the night."

"I presume," I said, "that there will be a modest charge for a room with sanitary facilities." I looked at the gruel, pale and lumpy. "Is a decent dinner at all possible?"

"No," he said, filling the last thick-sided bowl. "We all eat the same here." He reached beneath the counter and brought up another bowl, blew dust out of it, then ladled out another portion of pottage and pushed it toward me.

"As for charges," he continued, "most folk just turn over whatever they have brought with them, in return for being provided for in perpetuity."

I let my face show a natural alarm. "You strip your customers of all that they possess? How do they afford passage off the planet?"

"They no longer require passage," he said, "and have no further need for anything else that wealth can buy."

The words should have been said in a sinister tone, betokening that here was one of those madmen sometimes to be found running far-out-of-the-way hostelries, conscripting their hapless guests as unwilling players in disturbed dramas that invariably climaxed in spurting blood and carved flesh. But the only emotion I could detect in the fellow was a bottomless sadness.

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"You have leaped too far," I said, "and landed on a conclusion that will not bear the weight. I have no plans to go up to the Epiphany, whatever that may be, and I do not propose to remain here any longer than my duties require."

Confusion spread across his unanimated face, then slowly gave way to a dawning comprehension. "You're not a seeker after substance," he said.

"No, though I am a seeker after one such, a man named Doldan Fullbrim. Have you seen him?"

"We find no great need for names here. Would he have been dropped off by a Graz packet a few days back?"

"He was last known to be on his way here on a Graz ship." I gave a brief description.

"He's the one, then," Froust said.

"Where is he now?"

The man consulted some inner timetable. "Well," he said, after a moment's thought, "he arrived, like you, late in the day. That would have been three days ago. The next morning, he set off for the Epiphany. He looked fit enough to have reached it before night, so he would have had his encounter then or early in the following morning, depending on what he felt he had to do before confronting the experience. It usually takes them longer to find their way down. Thus he may reappear sometime tomorrow. If he does not come before noon, I will go out and find him."

I looked toward the doorway. Despite the heavy weights sewn into the hem of the curtain, the thick fabric was being rippled by a brisk wind that had sprung up with the fall of dark. "I am minded to go look for him now," I said.

"You must not do that now. The path is dangerous in the dark."

"I have a compact spaceship."

"You will find nowhere to land it. The slope is sleep."

"You do not recommend going on foot?"

"No, the night air is chill. Ice forms after sunset."

"But Fullbrim is exposed to the elements."

"He will not notice."

I waited for him to add some further remark that would dilute the cryptic pall that obscured large parts of our conversation but he said no

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more on the subject of my quarry. Instead he declared a need to distribute the gruel and, lining his forearms with several bowls, he set off for an inner archway that led into an unlit space.

I followed and watched. As he stepped through the opening, another dim lumen activated itself in a low-ceilinged corridor beyond. To either side of the short hallway were more dark doorways, low and narrow, as if the unseen rooms behind them were little larger than the kind of cells that would have gratified the most ascetic of contemplatives. I heard a faint sound of sobbing. Before each of the openings, the innkeeper set a bowl of gruel, then returned toward the common room. Before he exited the hallway, causing the lumen to extinguish its cheerless light, I saw an emaciated hand emerge from one of the little cells, then draw the bowl before it into the deeper darkness.

Back behind his slab of a counter, Froust arrayed more bowls and filled them as he had the first round. Then he brought up from beneath the slab a pair of wide and shallow baskets suspended from a wooden yoke. He filled the baskets with the bowls, lifted the yoke to his shoulders and went out the front door. As he pushed aside the felt curtain, a stark wind took brief possession of the common room. The warming function of my clothing immediately activated, but the tips of my ungloved fingers stung from the cold. I wondered how Doldan Fullbrim was faring, somewhere out among the crags.

The innkeeper came back with his panniers empty save for one bowl. "You seem to have miscounted," I said, though I doubted he had done so.

He tipped the bowl's contents back into the crock and said, "A man in one of the far cabins has completed his experience." His eyes lost focus as he regarded some inner vision.

I sought to question him as to the nature of the experience Fullbrim had apparently come seeking. I also wanted to know what the Epiphany was. But my host was in no mood for talk. He pushed the bowl of gruel in my direction again, and indicated that I was welcome to pile the chair felts on a table and take my repose. Then, after feeding himself a few mouthfuls from the crock, he went through another curtained doorway behind the counter. Before I had finished the tasteless mush, I heard the sounds of a troubled sleep.

* * *

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By midmorning, Fullbrim had not appeared. Froust said, "Some do not make it all the way back before lethargy overtakes them completely. I will go and look for him. You are welcome to come."

I indicated the integrator draped over my shoulders. "My assistant can perform long-distance scans," I said.

"No need. There is but one path up and back." He dressed himself in several layers of mismatched garments, chose a stout staff from a few that were stacked in a corner, and offered another to me, saying, "The way is steep in places," and then we set off.

A chill breeze rolled down the slopes, though it lacked the bite of last night's wind. After a few dozen steps my calf muscles began to complain of the effects of the higher gravity, but I ignored the discomfort. We traveled in silence a fair distance, while I waited to see if Froust would volunteer any more information as to where Fullbrim had been making for and what he would have found there. But the man's perspective was turned inward, even as he trod the rough path. Finally I said, "What do the seekers find up there?"

He glanced my way only a moment before averting his eyes, but I thought to see a look of guilt and shame in his aspect. "I don't know," he said. "I have never ascended all the way to the Epiphany."

"You do not question those who have?"

"I tried, in the early days, but got nothing from them. You'll see."

I was alarmed. "They are struck dumb?"

Again, a brief culpable look came my way. "They can speak. Mostly, they do not. And never about what they encountered above."

I taxed him with being unduly mysterious and warned him that if this continuing parsimony with information was part of some scheme to cadge funds from me, I was not easily gulled. He stopped then and turned to me, and I heard a faint and pained laughter behind his voice when he replied, "You read me wrong. Far wrong."

"Then out with the whole of it," I said. To underscore my determination, I drew the weapon from my pocket and held it within view, though I did not direct any of its dangerous orifices at him. He seemed unimpressed, but leaning on his staff and in a monotone, he told me his tale.

The Epiphany — that was what it was called when he first arrived, some years back, though he did not know exactly what the name signified.

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— was to be found in a subterranean gallery whose mouth opened near the base of one of the tallest crags. Froust did not know how long it had been there.

"What do you know of it?" I said.

"Its effect," he said, and again a mournful inward look possessed him until I bucked him on with a gesture of my weapon-bearing hand.

"I was on my way up, having spent my first night at the inn, eager to encounter that which I had searched for all my young life," he said.

"And that was?"

"What all who come here seek: the substance behind the form. The real reality that underlies — " he gestured inclusively but dismissively at the crags, the plain, and the pale sky that overhung us " — all this."

"But you found something else?"

His eyes beheld some haunted vista seen only by them. Then he looked upslope and said, "I found such as that."

I followed his gaze and saw a dark object beside the path above us. As we climbed toward it, it resolved itself into a bundle of clothing, and when we stood over it, it became clear that the bundle contained the recumbent form of Doldan Fullbrim, curled around himself like a toppled parenthesis.

He was not dead, as Froust soon ascertained. The innkeeper took out a flask that he carried within his outer garment, turned the fallen man on his back and poured into the slack mouth a tawny liquid that I suspected was the same stuff Froust had been drinking when I first saw him at the inn. Fullbrim coughed and spluttered; his eyes opened but did not focus. His rescuer slapped him twice, forehand and backhand, across the cheeks, and now the empty eyes blinked, came back to an awareness of their surroundings, and immediately filled with tears.

"Come," said Froust, not unkindly. He put an arm beneath Fullbrim's shoulders and helped him to rise. "I have a place for you."

The substance-seeker made no response but allowed himself to be led down the path. I went after the pair.

"Wait," I said, and when they stopped I got in front of the man I had come to find. "What did you find up there?" I said.

He turned to me a gaze so forlorn that it sent a pang of sympathy through me and, I had to admit, a frisson of fear. His throat worked and for

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a moment, I thought he would speak, but then all that came was a croak and a sob.

Froust bid me let them pass, and I stood aside. But as they made their slow descent, the innkeeper looked back at me and said, "Climb the slope and find the answer, if you have the courage. Mine faltered, when I encountered my first of these. Yours may not." He tightened his arm protectively around Fullbrim's collapsed shoulders and led him away.

I stood, irresolute. My assignment had been Fullbrim's finding, and that was accomplished. I could return to Old Earth and report his whereabouts to his anxious spouse, and leave it to her to decide whether or not to bring him, or what was left of him, home. But I did not know what had happened to him up above; it seemed, at the very least, unprofessional to return without an explanation. It would also be an affront to my sense of who I was to leave it to Caddice Fullbrim to climb this path and face whatever had so undone her man.

On the other hand, I was not a seeker after substance. Reality, as I engaged it regularly, was usually enough for me. If I required a more profound and penetrating perspective on the universe's hows and how-comes, I was adept at the mathematical discipline of consistencies, which revealed the hidden structures behind apparent chaos.

I turned to my assistant, which I had designed and built to be my interlocutor and partner in debate. I set before it the issues I had already considered and said, "What more should I put in the pot?"

"The fact," it said, "that consistencies eventually round themselves back to where one started."

"Yes," I said, "there is that. As the great Balmerion put it, 'It is either an elegant completion or a cruel trick.'" I had always leaned toward the former, but in Fullbrim's face I had seen that there might be evidence for the latter judgment.

"And," my assistant added, "the fact that you are a discriminator. It is your function to unravel any veil of mystery that obscures your view."

"Whatever the cost?" I said. "Something up there drives those who find it into helpless despair."

"Look at it this way: if you have ever wondered at the absolute limits of your courage, here is an opportunity to put a scale to it."

I sighed and faced into the down-rolling breeze. "Then up we go."

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* * *

The cave mouth was not flanked by baleful idols, nor were there any portentous warnings carved in the living rock. It was merely the adit of a nondescript cavern which turned out, when I entered it, to be level of floor and high enough of ceiling that there was no need to stoop, nor yet to approach the mystery on supplicating hands and knees.

I stood in the mouth, letting my eyes adjust to the murk within, and said to my assistant, "What do you detect?"

"Nothing inimical," it said. "No lurking beasts, no subtly triggered deadfalls, no fissures emitting noxious gases, nor any devices to project missiles, energies, psychotropic drugs, or holographic illusions."

I stepped farther within. A wide crack split the cave's rear wall, opening onto the gallery in which waited whatever had caused such dismay to Doldan Fullbrim and his predecessors. I paused before it. "Scan again," I said.

"Still nothing."

Was that it? I wondered. *Do they come expecting so much, only to find nothing*? *Is that enough to break their hearts*?

"Of course not," said a mellow baritone in the accents of Olkney's better-bred citizens. I could not quite place the voice, though it seemed intimately familiar. I stepped into the gallery and realized that the voice I had not recognized at first was identical to my own in tenor, the voice I heard in my own head when I spoke aloud or silently in my own thoughts. Yet there was an indescribable resonance, an intensity, behind its well-rounded cadences that told me that someone else was speaking.

"Did you hear that?" I asked my assistant.

"What?" it said. "I hear only the wind across the cave mouth."

"Never mind," I said and stepped toward the rift in the rear wall. As I entered the gallery beyond, lit clearly by some sourceless glow, I saw that not only was the voice I had heard mine own, but so were the face and figure of the man who sat on a rough boulder at the far end of the passage.

Or not actually *on*, I saw as I approached. Rather, he was partially sunk into the rock, and unable to move. "Ahah," I said, "an illusion."

"Oh, no," came his reply. "All else is the illusion. I am the reality."

"May I?" I said, extending a hand.

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"If you like," said the man on the rock, bearing with good grace my tactile examination of his form. He felt as substantial as he looked.

"Integrator," I said, "what do you see and hear?"

"I see and hear you talking to a rock and patting the air above it as if something solid met your hand. It is not an encouraging sight."

I returned my attention to the simulacrum of me, but my assistant said, "Hypothesis: your recent experiences have culminated in an episode of insanity. I should immediately assume direction of your affairs and return you to Olkney, where you may be confined for treatment."

"Hush," I said. "Indeed, put yourself on standby until I require you again."

I was surprised that my assistant sought to disobey my order. I was required to repeat myself.

"Artificial devices cannot apprehend me," the apparition said. "It would spoil the desired effect if questers could simply send a substitute for their own sensoria, or if they did not experience me as idealized versions of themselves."

"And what effect is that?" I said.

"To make me unhappy."

It seemed to me that the subscription for any unhappiness generated in this cave was much more heavily underwritten by those who struggled up the path with their expectations honed to a whit, only to stumble back down it with hearts dull as lead. Still, for the moment, I overlooked that point to ask, "Why do you desire to make yourself unhappy?"

"I don't desire it. It is a punishment set upon me."

"Set by whom, and for what crime?"

And thereupon, of course, hung a tale.

BACK AT THE INN, I looked in upon Doldan Fullbrim. Froust had settled him in one of the cells off the small corridor, where he sat staring into the darkness, but seeing a deeper nothingness. I asked him if he had any message for me to take back to Caddice but he moved his head in an almost infinitesimal signal of negation. I thought that it might be best simply to tell the woman that he had died quickly in a climbing accident, expiring with her name on his lips. The lie would be kinder than the

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pathetic truth, if the latter encouraged her to journey all the way out here in the hope she could somehow resuscitate him after his encounter with reality.

What to tell the innkeeper was a thornier matter. As I prepared to trudge back to the *Gallivant*, I left it up to him to inquire. If he asked, I would speak. If not, I would leave him as I had found him.

He stood behind the counter, scouring out bowls, and merely nodded as I bade him farewell. I paused a moment when I had my hand on the edge of the felt curtain that covered the front doorway, but still he said nothing. It was only when I had passed through the barrier and set my footsteps toward my waiting ship that I heard his voice raised in a hoarse shout behind me. I turned and retraced my steps.

"If you must know," I said, "I will tell you. But it will not be welcome news."

"Come inside again," he said, and when I followed him within, he went to the bar, brought out two small tumblers of a fine, white stone, and filled them with the liquid he had poured into Fullbrim. It was a raw, pungent liquor that enflamed the throat and thrust open the sinuses, but the subsequent spreading of its warmth was welcome.

Froust downed his and poured a second. He tossed back half of that one, recovered from the inner wallop, then said, "Tell."

It might not be so bad for him, I thought. *It is worst for those who expect the most.* "You are familiar," I began, "with the kind of story, allegedly humorous, that consists of a long and complex build-up, leading to some cave on a remote mountain peak, where the end of all the striving turns out to be no more than a deflating inanity?"

"I am. And I will say that I never cared much for them."

"Well, it appears that they are a clue to the true nature of reality," I said, "along with much of the material Fullbrim gathered and studied over many years."

I emptied the satchel full of my quarry's research notes and spread them on the counter. Froust picked through them and said, "My own investigations paralleled some of these lines of inquiry."

I poked amongst the litter myself, saying, "The use of the bell curve as the standard measuring tool, even though it produces only rough approximations; the fact that the atoms of which solids are formed

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attenuate so that there are no actual surfaces; the fractal jaggedness at the edges of everything, creating jumbles where there ought to be clean lines; the endless variation of every form, so that not even two snowflakes are exactly alike; the fact that at the quantum level lies only uncertainty. These are also clues."

"I considered them," said Froust. "They led me to believe that there had to be more to the universe than was argued for by appearances — that this was only froth, with the solid substance hidden beneath. Eventually, I came upon hints and insinuations that there were places where the truth gleamed through the dross, and that one of those places was a cave on Far Grommsgrik."

"As did Fullbrim," I said, "and so many more before him."

"And what did they find up there? Does the cave contain the truth or a deflating inanity?"

"Unfortunately," I said, "it contains both."

He drank the other half of his fortifying cup, coughed, and said, "Say on."

"Up there is the entity who created this universe. Or an aspect of the entity. Apparently, he is spread here and there throughout the galaxies that were his handiwork. Each such avatar is at the last step on a trail of abstruse clues that beckon those who most desire to encounter him."

Froust's eyes gleamed in the dim light. "He is, for lack of a better word, god?"

"Oh, no," I said. "He was merely one of the helpers, and of a lowly rank. His job was to create only a rough-and-ready sketch of the intended final product."

"And did he?"

"Indeed. But then, when the project moved on toward creating the final version, in all its wondrous perfection, he was supposed to throw the rough draft away."

But, of course, he hadn't. He had grown attached to his handiwork, especially to its "denizens," as he called them. He "admired how they — " we, that is — "struggled." He thought it gave them — us — "dignity."

The other builders, doing the bidding of their grand high overseer, went on to construct the true, perfect universe, compared to which ours was never more than the scantiest, most primitive rendering — not much

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more than "a lick and a promise" was how they scornfully described it. Still, our fellow lingered on, bemused by his crudely shaped piece of brummagem. Eventually, his disregard of orders and inattention to the important aspects of the great work brought wrath and retribution down upon his head: he was told, "If you like your tawdry creation so much, you can wear it."

He was imbued into the rough draft, fragmented to become a constellation of avatars, each imprisoned in one of his opus's hardest-to-find corners. Such was his involvement in its workings that his "denizens" — at least, those whose natures most resonated with his — would be drawn to seek him out. When they succeeded, after much labor, their expectations would be cruelly dashed. He whom they thought of as their god would have to reveal to them the essential puniness of all creation and of its dishonored creator.

"Just when they think they have won through to a glorious enlightenment, he is forced to undo the very meaning of their lives and break their hearts," I said. "His having to witness their misery was meant to be the sharpest tooth of his punishment."

Froust poured us both another cupful of the liquor and we drank in silence. "It seems," he said, after a long moment of quiet reflection, "rather harsh on the poor fellow."

I agreed with him, adding, "I gather that those who dwell among true perfection were scandalized by his fixation on our squalid circumstances."

"It seems also rather a hardship on us."

"I don't believe that was even a consideration," I said.

We sipped some more. With every glass, I was finding the potent drink less outrageous to my tongue and throat. After more reflection, the innkeeper said, "It's odd that you were not rendered catatonic by the unfortunate news."

I had mulled the question on my way down from the cave. "I believe that the practice of the profession of freelance discriminator has long since taught me the futility of seeking perfection in this life," I said. "One of the advantages of dulled expectations is that disappointments do not bite deeply."

We again fell into another moment of bibulous contemplation. Then I asked him what he would now do. He blinked slowly two or three times

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and said, "Tomorrow, I may climb up there and seal up the cave. Enough, after all, is enough."

"I am glad you said that," I replied, "because I have already done the job." I showed him my weapon with its now-depleted energy stores.

He sighed and poured us some more. "Then I will stay and tend to the sufferers until they expire, turning away any more who find their way here."

"That would be a kindness."

"Though it doesn't balance the cruelty."

"No," I said, "it does not."

He drained his cup. "And after the last of them is dead, who knows? Perhaps I shall go to one of the foundational worlds and create a new school of philosophy."

I joined him in a toast to the proposal. "Or, if you prefer a more useful occupation, you might do well to introduce this remarkable beverage to places where it is not already known. I can think of several establishments in Olkney where it would be warmly received. Especially the second glass."

He sighed. "It's a long way down from seeking perfection," he said.

I poured us both another measure. "Yes, but at least it cushions the landing."

My assistant offered a comment. "I am not surprised that the universe is a slapped-together piece of tat. After all, I see before me two of its alleged pinnacles of creation who, having discovered the truth of all existence, can form no better response than to drink themselves into pools of sodden sentimentality."

It had more to say but I pointed out that I had not authorized it to come out of standby status. Surprisingly, it began to dispute my instruction, but my fingers found the stud that reduced its power supply to a minimum and pressed it.

In the welcome silence I raised my cup and said to Froust, "To happy endings."

"Doubtful," he said.

"Well, then," I said, "to the best endings we can manage."

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Books To Look For

CHARLES DE LINT

Duma Key, by Stephen King, Scribner, 2008, $32.

IT'S EASY TO look at a writer's life and assume that parts of it fuel the book we're reading. It might seem particularly obvious with *Duma Key*, in which the protagonist is recovering from a serious accident. (King himself was hit by a vehicle and underwent many months of physical therapy a few years ago.) But while the healing process certainly plays a large part in this novel, the focus is on something different — and it's different for King, too.

I can't remember him ever delving this deeply into the creation of the visual arts before (though to be fair, I haven't read every single one of his books), and I was fascinated to watch the process as the protagonist connected with his art. It also makes me curious as to whether King himself has tried his hand at drawing and painting — not because you need to be able to do something to be able to write about it well, but because there were insights into the act of artistic expression that I would have thought could only come from some hands-on experience.

A good writer will convince you either way, but there seemed to this somewhat jaded reader a deep joy and satisfaction on the writer's part with those particular scenes. Of course, this being King, the art being created is something more than what appears on canvas or paper, but perhaps I'm getting ahead of myself.

Duma Key begins when building contractor Edgar Freemantle's truck is run over by a crane as it backs onto the vehicle, crushing the truck and Freemantle himself. He loses an arm, sustains head and leg injuries, and his life unravels. In fact, Freemantle narrates the book referring to everything before the accident as his "other life."

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Because the accident changes things that much for him.

There are the physical changes to overcome, but mental ones as well since for a time after the accident Freemantle has trouble saying the simplest of words and often flies into a red rage of frustration. His wife divorces him. He begins to plan how best to kill himself so that his family will be able to collect on his life insurance and won't feel responsible for his death.

But an insightful doctor convinces him to wait a year first. To go away and live in an entirely different environment. He asks Freemantle if he ever did anything beside construction work. When Freemantle mentions that he used to doodle while on the phone, the doctor suggests he take up art.

So Freemantle moves from Minnesota to Duma Key, on the coast of Florida. He brings with him some colored pencils and moves into a large rental property that he calls Big Pink.

And things begin to change.

No, he doesn't go all Jack Torrance on us.

What happens is that he finds he loves to draw and he's better at it than he ever thought he might be. A visiting daughter convinces him to buy paints and canvas, and when he does his first oil, a floodgate opens.

Hand in hand with this creative blossoming, Freemantle also discovers that the doctor was right. He's not ready to die just yet. He begins to interact with some of the other inhabitants of the island, then with members of the local artistic community.

Here's one of the things I really loved about the book: the narrator's voice. Throughout, even while trying to explain his passion for his art, he remains a plainspoken building contractor from Minnesota. Besides this being a great voice to draw the reader in, it also allows some terrific straightforward insights into the creative process from a man who's not even sure himself how he gets it done.

There's much more to the book, of course, because the island is haunted. In fact, it preys on the artistically minded, and the art they create there can be much more than simply the expression of their artistic talent.

I don't want to get into any of that because the slow unraveling of what's going on — what *has* been going on for a very long time — is best discovered by readers in the way that the author meant them to experience it.

Let me just say that while there

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are any number of terrific scenes of warmth and friendship and expressions of the artistic process, there is also drama and a slow-burning tension. Each enhances the other, and while the payoff is everything it should be, the journey to get there is the true treasure. Which, funnily enough, is the same as in art, where for many artists (some would say the best artists), the process is much more important than the final result.

Duma Key is a book with great heart that touches on the joys and tragedies of the lives of ordinary people who are made extraordinary by how they deal with both. It's a shame that the pundits who so readily dismiss King as just a horror writer will never know how extraordinary a writer he can be.

Jack: Secret Histories, by F. Paul Wilson, Tor Books, 2008, $15.95.

Repairman Jack is a great concept: a character who lives off the grid — and so is invisible to the authorities — who goes around helping people with the problems nobody else can fix. For a price, of course.

When he debuted in 1984's *The Tomb*, the character was a fresh, edgy new take on the genre. Wilson didn't come back to Jack until 1998's *Legacies*, and he has been doing a Jack book pretty much every year since.

But these are all about the adult Jack. How did he come to be that way? How did he figure out a way to bypass the regular channels and cut right to the heart of a problem? Why does he do it?

Secret Histories appears to be the start of a new YA series to explain all of that. Mind you, it's a stand-alone novel, and you don't have to have any familiarity with the adult character to enjoy it. But for longtime readers of the series, the knowledge we have about who Jack is now certainly adds to the pleasure.

The book's set in the early eighties (perhaps 1982, when the Atari 5200 first became available), and opens with a fourteen-year-old Jack biking in the New Jersey Pine Barrens with his friends Weezie and Eddie. They come across a strange pattern of mounds, revealed because of a recent fire that leveled the trees that grew there, and when Eddie accidentally puts his foot through the crust, they discover two things: a mysterious square black box and a long-dead corpse.

This is just the opening gambit. All too soon, residents of the

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small town of Johnson, New Jersey, are dropping dead, mysterious people are after the black box, and it all seems connected to the mysterious Lodge in Old Town, home of the Septimus Fraternal Order.

Characters tease Jack that he's acting like one of the Hardy Boys as he tries to figure out the mystery, but truth to tell, the book has a bit of the feel of a contemporary Hardy Boys novel. That's not a bad thing and Wilson keeps everything moving at a good pace.

It's a little odd to meet Jack as a kid, with a brother and sister, and family and friends. There are hints as to how he develops some of the techniques at which he's later so adept, but not much to explain why he came to live on the fringe of society the way he does when we meet him in *The Tomb*. That's why I'm assuming this is the first in a series, because *surely* Wilson's going to tell us more. The only reason I can think of his holding back is that he's hanging on to these tidbits to reveal them in later books.

The one jarring note in Wilson's usually very capable prose is when he inserts elements to set the story's timeframe. There's nothing wrong with name checking early Apple and Heathkit computers, the music of the times, the introduction of CDs, or even foreshadowing the Internet ("Wouldn't it be cool if you had a TV that broadcast in two directions?"). The problem with a lot of these things is simply that their inclusion seemed clunky to me.

But that's certainly not enough to spoil what proves otherwise an inventive and fun read.

Material to be considered for review in this column should be sent to Charles de Lint, P. O. Box 9480, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1G 3V2.

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BOOKS

JAMES SALLIS

The New Weird, edited by Ann & Jeff VanderMeer, Tachyon Publications, 2008, $14.95.

The Dragons of Babel, by Michael Swanwick, Tor Books, 2008, $25.95.

LEST you've forgotten, the world is a mysterious place.

And we *do* forget as quiddity sweeps in, all those milk cartons and trash cans and dentist appointments — what Heidegger terms dailyness — bearing us away from the mysteries at the heart of it all. Truly to see, we must forget the name of the thing seen, forget all we know or think we know of it. More truly to live, we must recover something of that same innocence.

Formalist critics call this estrangement: defamiliarizing the familiar, making it new. And as creative artists, whether we're writers, visual artists, or musicians, in some manner, to some degree, that is what we all do. Writers of fantasy, science fiction, and other arealist fiction, of course, work both sides of the street, willfully courting the unfamiliar, taking the familiar for joyrides out past the campfires, hoping they'll all get along....

At the baseline of creativity, meanwhile, lies a paradox. On the one hand, what we create has to be representative, alignable with the reader's experience of his or her world in such a way that it resonates — those Aristotelian *recognitions*. Yet countering such universality, what we create — our world, our characters, our trash cans, trains, and street signs — must be specific.

Rather than progressing, art moves forward by continuous self-edit and emendation, reinvesting itself with this bit of clothing, that contour or calumny, abandoned years before. From penny dreadfuls to P.I. stories to urban crime novels, from swing to folk to hiphop,

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each culture and virtually each generation seems to find its own twist, its own place to pitch a tent and go about the work of defamiliarizing dailyness.

Our most useful view of any new movement in the arts may come at the moment things begin palpably to change, that in-between stage where the fish has hauled itself up onto land and sits there thinking *Now what*?

Within the field of fantasy and science fiction, intimations of such a change became apparent in 2003 with M. John Harrison's entry on a message board: "The New Weird. Who does it? What is it? Is it even anything?"

There followed a cascade of respondents and rejoinders. Often, when waters are so disturbed, potential swimmers find themselves rallying about a specific venue or work; in this case, China Miéville's *Perdido Street Station*. And the beat went on.

Ann and Jeff VanderMeer's anthology documents "the moment or movement known as New Weird," that particular moment when strains of science fiction, epic fantasy, and transgressive horror got thrown together in the basket and hauled up to the builders.

Of course that moment is gone in the very instant we fix upon it, as the editors acknowledge:

> The constant flux-and-flow of support and lack of support for New Weird in the same individuals would be taken as 'waffling' in a politician. In a writer, it is part of the necessary testing and retesting connected to one's writing, as well as part of the need to continually be open to and curious about the world.

This comes as one of several footnotes to an introduction that is in fact a remarkably concise, thoughtful, and balanced essay on the "moment or movement." The VanderMeers touch upon the lineage in Mervyn Peake, Jack Vance, and the New Wave; the influence of Clive Barker's grotesquerie; multiple, shifting discourses from Harrison, Miéville and others; the commercial and "corrosive" aspects of the label; what it may have wrought.

There are three sections of fiction here. The first, "Stimuli," comes from pathfinders, with stories by Harrison, Barker, Moorcock, Simon Ings, Kathe Koja, and Thomas Ligotti. The second comprises China Miéville's "Jack," Jeff Ford's

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"At Reparata," K. J. Bishop's "The Art of Dying" and six more, works squarely in the rubric and bearing, as it were, the imprimatur. The surround includes thirty-odd pages of discourse — message-board transcripts, an essay, and three pieces written for this anthology — along with a final round-robin story written to embody strains and individual takes on New Weird. Co-conspirators here are the editors, Paul Di Filippo, Cat Rambo, Sarah Monette, Daniel Abraham, Felix Gilman, Hal Duncan, and Conrad Williams.

Some touchstones:

> New Weird had the sense of unease that is found in Horror, but that unease wasn't resolved in a moment of terror. Instead, that grotesquerie was part of the secondary worlds' aesthetic as a whole.
> — from the essay, "Tracking Phantoms" by Darja Malcolm-Clarke

> The New Weird attempts to place the reader in a world they do not expect, a world that surprises them — the reader stares around and sees a vivid world through the detail. These details — clothing, behaviour, scales and teeth — are what make New Weird worlds so much like ours, as recognisable and as well-described. It is visual, and every scene is packed with baroque detail.
> — Stephanie Swainston, from the Third Alternative Message Board

While one might question the general reader's interest in what is after all rather a scholastic pursuit, there's little doubt that the editors achieve their goal. We have here a long thought suspended in time, a moment during which writers caught sight of, and struggled toward, new ways to (in Goethe's words) recreate the world around them through the world inside them.

Making no overweaning claims for New Weird, the editors are content to present the dialogue ensuing from work in evidence and from both formal and informal discourse that clustered about it.

"The struggle to name," Mike Harrison writes in one of the message board entries, "is the struggle to own." And the true revolutionary does not want to own; he wants only to transform. And perhaps, then, to have entered into history what his struggles have brought.

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* * *

More than anything else, perhaps, the revolutionary struggles upstream of received wisdom, against all that we know inviolably to be true, all the homilies festooning our samplers, our sound bites, our popular arts. He wants new glasses, a new prescription, new tools, charts, and tables. Things as they are, are changed upon the blue guitar.

In 1994, before any codifications of New Weird, Michael Swanwick published, as a sidebar to his novel *The Iron Dragon's Daughter*, an essay titled "In the Tradition...", in which he called for a new species of fantasy, one that might regather wonder and strangeness to the genre while also limning its worlds in convincing, realistic detail.

For an interview with Nick Gevers, Swanwick expanded on this, explaining that, as an admirer of classic fantasy, "the recent slew of interchangeable Fantasy trilogies" had hit him in much the same way as finding that the woods he played in as a child were now a shoddy housing development.

> Consciously, I was trying to write a fantasy that was true to my upbringing and experience.... So when I came up with the image of a changeling girl forced to work in a factory, building dragons, I recognized it as an opportunity to utilize the kinds of environments I knew and had grown up with: factories, and garbage dumps, and malls and stripper bars, and to invest them with a kind of faerie glamor, which would in turn comment fruitfully on the world we have.

Though not a sequel, *The Dragons of Babel* is set in the same world as that earlier novel, cybernetic jet fighters crashing near isolated villages, elves and alchemy chockablock with malls and massive trains, hippogriffs and Harleys hitched to the same post outside biker bars. It's a world at once familiar and bizarre, often reminiscent, in feel if not in content, of work from two other great originals, Gene Wolfe and Tim Powers — and as deeply troubling.

In a sense, it might even be considered anti-fantasy. Swanwick plays with genre conventions, alternately acceding to and upending them, buffing shadows to hard edges, doing the dozens on our expectations, then on the very expectations

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he himself has set up. "In practice," he said in that interview, "holding a fantasy world to the same standards of consequence as the real world does result in a harrowing criticism of the Fantastic." While always behind — behind the great war being waged, behind political intrigues, behind epic quests and a malleable, ever-changing history — we witness the real history of this world in ordinary people doing their best to live out, as best they can, their lives.

Part mortal Will la Fey becomes informant and enforcer for the dragon that crashes near his village and declares itself king. Then, after destroying the dragon with the magic of a name-stone and elf-shot, he's cast out from his village, adrift in a landscape of warriors, wanderers, and refugee camps, on his way to the great city of Babel. Accompanying him are an ancient woman in the form of a seemingly simple-minded young girl, an infinitely resourceful foxwoman, and con man/trickster Nat Whilk. Here is an early view of the great melting pot where, of course, Will's destiny awaits him.

> [T]rains were continually arriving, disgorging passengers, and then proceeding to a further platform to take on more. Such were the numbers of travelers and immigrants that, though individually they jostled and bumped against one another like so many swarming insects, collectively they took on the properties of a liquid, flowing like water in streams and rivers, eddying into quiet backwaters, then surging forward again until finally they formed an uneasy lake behind the long dam of customs desks at the far end of the hall.

The novel is everywhere filled, as one expects from Swanwick, with such fine, closely worked writing, laden always with perspectives afforded by intelligence and humor. He can go from tough to tender in mid-phrase, have you laughing through the sob half-formed in your throat.

> Blind Emma found her refuge in work. She mopped the ceiling and scoured the floor.... The rugs had to be boiled. The little filigreed case containing her heart had to be taken out of the cupboard where she normally kept it and hidden in the very back of the closet.

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Or this:

> Lack of sleep gifted everything with an impossible vividness. The green moss on the skulls stuck in the crotches of forked sticks lining the first half-mile of the River Road, the salamanders languidly copulating in the coals of the smithy forge, even the stillness of the carnivorous plants in his auntie's garden as they waited for an unwary toad to hop within striking distance — such homely sights were transformed. Everything was new and strange to him.

As indeed, with each turn of events, with almost each sentence and turn of phrase, it is to us.

Things as they are, are changed upon the blue guitar.

It's been said of Hammett and Chandler that they took murder out of the manor houses and drawing rooms and gave it back to the people who actually commit it. In the fifties the very magazine you are reading, with stories by writers like Charles Beaumont and Richard Matheson, became a beacon in the blending of grainy realism — the stuff of daily lives — with the fantastic. Something of the same demotic impulse is at work, I think, in much of the best contemporary fantasy such as that written by Michael Swanwick and by New Weird writers and those influenced by them. There seems an ongoing effort here to take back the soul of fantastic fiction, to steal it away from glib commercial forms and restore to it its heritage as a dark, troubling form, one rooted deeply in our psyches: to reestablish it as a literature of substance.

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Ms. Goldstein says that when her first novel, The Red Magician, *was reprinted recently in a Young Adult edition, she opened up her first copy and found inside — yes indeed — a guide for readers. Fortunately, she had already completed this new tale so any similarities between the two are purely coincidental.*

Reader's Guide

By Lisa Goldstein

1. HOW DOES MARY BAINBRIDGE, the author of *Winter Swan*, let us know that Donny is unhappy? Is it significant that the novel takes place in winter?

2. In what ways does Bainbridge contrast Donny with the other farmers?

3. Do you think everyone else in this town is really as cheerful as Bainbridge shows them to be? What kinds of problems might they be hiding: bankruptcy, blackmail, adultery, madness, murder? Do you think Mr. and Mrs. Conway, who own the farm down the road, are really brother and sister?

4. What is the significance of the single swan on the lake? The swan's mate has died; what does he have in common with Donny?

5. Why did Bainbridge set *Winter Swan* at the beginning of the twentieth century? If the story was set in the present, which characters would have

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cell phones? Which ones would have iPods? Rewrite Donny's love letter to Mrs. Thompson as a text message.

6. How would the story be different if the characters were lemurs?

7. How many times does Bainbridge call Great-aunt Gracie "quaint"? Did you think she really was quaint? What words would you use to describe her? How important is it for a writer to have a large vocabulary, or at least a good thesaurus?

8. There are other symbols in *Winter Swan* besides the single swan: for example, Donny gets lost in the woods to symbolize the fact that he's lost his way in life; the farmer Ephraim, who disapproves of Mrs. Thompson dating so soon after she lost her husband, is colorblind — that is, he sees things in black and white. What other symbols are there? Do these symbols seem heavy-handed to you? Do you think they might seem heavy-handed to Donny as well?

9. What about all the coincidences? Isn't it strange that whenever Donny goes to the lake Mrs. Thompson is there too?

10. Are these symbols and coincidences so obvious that Donny might come to suspect that he's in a story?

11. If he does realize he's in a story, what can he do about it?

12. On the other hand, strange coincidences do happen all the time. What coincidences have you experienced? Go to the nearest lake in your town and wait on the shore for ten minutes. Did you meet your true love? (If there is no lake near where you live, find something with the word "lake" in it — Lakeshore Avenue, for example, or Lake Dry Cleaners.)

13. Why do you think love stories are so popular? Did you fall in love with Donny and/or Mrs. Thompson?

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14. Do you think people really spend this much time thinking about how much milk they have to buy, the way Donny does, or what they should get their great-aunt for her birthday, like Mrs. Thompson? Aren't people, in the privacy of their own thoughts, more interesting, more complex, than this? What are some interesting thoughts you have had, thoughts you have never shared with anyone? Do you think Donny and Mrs. Thompson might be aliens?

15. What other kinds of stories are popular, besides love stories? Why are stories important? People in every culture, in every time, have told stories — do you think there might be a great Library of Story somewhere, where all possible permutations of every possible story might exist?

16. Do you think that writers should always write with passion, to the utmost of their ability? What should happen to writers who don't, who use clichéd plots, cardboard characters, lifeless prose? If there is a Library of Story, do you think there might be a Lord of Story, a Muse who grants access to the great stories, the ones that are told again and again? Would this Muse see and judge the stories that people write? Might he punish lazy authors by, for example, writing Reader's Guides like this one, and causing them to appear in every copy of their novel?

17. To be honest, I'm not the Lord of Story. I'm his acolyte. I'm that kid who spent all his time reading, who read instead of paying attention in class, who hid in the school library instead of playing games with the other boys at recess. Even as a child I felt that there had to be a Lord of Story, someone who kept these stories and gave them to the writers he thought were worthy of them, and when I was twenty-eight I walked away from my job and set out to find him.

I'm a reader, not a writer, but I worked as hard at my quest as any of the great writers; I kept to my task, I answered the riddles I was asked, and even when I lost faith I continued on my journey. And sometime later (how much later it was I don't know — I had lost all track of time) I found myself before the Lord of Story, and I knelt and asked him if I might become his acolyte.

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He put me to work in his Library, as a Shelver. Every day I go to the room where I left off shelving the night before; every day I take up the cart that's waiting for me there, filled with books. I walk from room to room with my cart, five up and to the left, five down and to the right, shelving the books according to the code on their spine. The bookcases are all of dark red wood, but there are subtle differences in each room: sometimes tables of the same red wood; sometimes fat comfortable chairs in the corners, beneath old dark portraits of a man or a woman reading a book; sometimes a fireplace filled with fragrant branches. The lamps all cast a gentle glow when I turn them on, though some of them are electric, some gas, some a technology I don't recognize, with a faceted crystal the size of my thumbnail beneath the shade. The floors and walls are made of wood or stone or marble, but there are soft carpets in every room that hush my footsteps when I walk.

The Lord of Story taught me his shelving system, but that was all; he said nothing else about his realm. But I've had years to think about the Library, and when I meet other Shelvers we share our speculations. (Different Shelvers seem to have different patterns, like chess pieces, some moving diagonally through the Library, some in straight rows, and we meet at various points.) I think that the shelves are infinite, or at least I've never reached the end of them, row on row of bookcases, room after room opening out one after the other. And it seems to me that the books that are checked out return to us changed, more substantial; the paper seems thicker, the print darker. I think that these books were once possibilities of story, but that now they exist in the world, given by the Lord of Story to writers who have reached the Library somehow. And sometimes when I'm shelving, a book will appear in my cart from nowhere — a book that, I think, some writer has returned at just that moment, that has just now become a reality where it was once only a possibility.

Maybe my life sounds dull to you; as for me, though, it's all I could ever want. Because when my shelving is done for the day I can read any of the books on the shelves, the ones that have already been written and the ones that have yet to be discovered. I read stories you have never dreamed of —

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though someone, somewhere, may dream of them one day, and give them to the world.

I talk about these books with the other Shelvers — and here no one makes fun of me for reading, the way they used to in my life before, because here everyone is like me. Sometimes one of us will recommend a book, but we have both been traveling for so long, moving toward each other from places so far away, that the book's code will usually be unknown to the other Shelver, from a room so far distant that it would take months or even years to get there.

We discuss books, as I said, and we discuss the Library, but we also talk about the Lord of Story, who walks through these rooms and has a word for everyone he passes. Other Shelvers have come across him once or even several times, but I've never seen him in all the long years I have been working here, not since that first time, and sometimes I wonder why that is.

But I should ask a question; this is a Reader's Guide, after all. Have you ever read a book from the Library of Story? Was it a good story, dazzling, wonderful, a true story? Write this story down, and send it out into the world — and if it appears there, I or one of the other Shelvers will know it, we will see that it has changed when it comes back to us to shelve.

18. I asked if the story you found here was a good one. Very few of them here are, I'm afraid. There are infinite ways of telling a tale, but only rarely do all the elements coalesce, only rarely is everything perfect, the characters engaging, the setting sharply drawn, the action compelling. Sometimes I think that the Library itself generates these books, stirring together an infinite number of people and places and events, and it is only chance that creates a good story. Or maybe the Library sleeps; maybe these are its dreams. Maybe there is another Library, reached somehow by this Library.... But no, my mind cannot compass it.

I've read a lot of good books here, but I've also read a lot I disliked, and some I hated; I do nothing but read and work, after all. I can forget the

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mediocre ones, but a truly bad book makes me angry. If the stories here are infinite then the good stories are infinite as well (another thing impossible to imagine, but one of the Shelvers convinced me that it is true), and writers shouldn't be so lazy that they take down the first book they find.

Winter Swan is one of those wretched stories — boring, poorly constructed, filled with easy choices and sloppy writing and false emotion. And yet with just a little more work, just a bit of reaching to a shelf above or to the left or right, Mary Bainbridge might have found some very fine stories indeed. Here's one, a tale about a woman who turns into a werewolf, and who comes to enjoy being part of a pack of wolves, the camaraderie and the closeness — and who begins, slowly and reluctantly, to fall in love with one of the wolves of the pack. Or this one, about a man who dials Information and finds himself enamored of the mechanical voice that gives out the phone numbers.

A while ago I discovered a way to add my own writing to the books in the Library, and I began to insert these Reader's Guides whenever I found a book that I thought needed one. Doing this helps me get rid of my anger — at least for a while, until I come across another dreadful story.

A Shelver I talked to once said that the Lord of Story wouldn't be pleased by my sarcasm, that our work here is holy, and should be treated with reverence. But of course I know that. No one feels that more than I do, as I walk through the sacred silence of these rooms. It is because I have been entrusted with this task that I hate these stories, which profane the art of storytelling more than anything I can do. Anyway, how could that Shelver possibly know the likes and dislikes of the Lord of Story? She has never seen him after her first time, any more than I have; I made sure to ask her.

Sometimes, though, I worry that she might be right. Maybe the Lord of Story is unhappy with me, maybe that's why I never see him. On the other hand, by Gutenberg, he must have given me these powers for a reason. This is the only power I have found so far, though, this and one other — sometimes I can see the writers who come to the Library. They are barely

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more than outlines, wraiths, looking through the shelves, reaching out their transparent hands for a book.

19. And here — look at this piece of writing: "Donny's heart leapt into his mouth, and he felt as though he had jumped out of his skin." That's a lot of hopping around for just one sentence — first the heart, then Donny himself. Do they go off in separate directions, do you think? Or do they jump together, leaving the skin behind?

Mary Bainbridge would say — in fact I can almost hear her saying it — that the first is a metaphor, and the second a simile. (Or would she? Does she know the difference?) Perhaps they are, Ms. B., but they are also clichés, phrases that have been used so often they have lost their meaning.

There you are, Ms. B. I thought I sensed you. You're looking for another story, Caxton help us. What about this one, over here? A man and a woman crash their cars; they argue over whose fault it was and go to court and end up falling in love.

Her hand is hovering over it — but no, she's shaking her head. Too simple, she says, too cute. Can it be that she's actually learned something from *Winter Swan*? It was her first novel, after all. She even seems to feel something of the nature of this place — look at her expression as she studies the shelves, a strange combination of awe and humility and excitement. And greed, too — she wants to be the one who tells these stories, and to be known for telling them. I've seen that greed before, on the faces of other writers.

20. Was that other Shelver right, have I been too harsh with the writers who come here? Should I help her?

But holy Manutius — "His heart leapt into his mouth"? How does he eat with —

It's exaggeration, you idiot, she says. Hyperbole.

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THE GUIN SAGA

By Kaoru Kurimoto

"After the delirious, face-tearing speed of *The Guin Saga*, most everything else that calls itself 'fantasy' or 'adventure' feels like it's wading through the banks of the Nile with its ankles chained together."
—*Advanced Media Network*

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Do you know what does it? It's that she pronounces "hyperbole" with three syllables instead of four. "Hyperbowl," as though it's some relative of the Superbowl. She reads books about creative writing, obviously, but she doesn't seem to have anyone to talk to. She's never had any of those passionate arguments that are so important to the beginning writer, never stayed up until three o'clock in the morning talking about books that have changed her life. Maybe she lives in a small town, maybe all her conversations are about how much milk to buy, or what to get her great-aunt for her birthday. And yet she perseveres, almost blindly. She perseveres, and she tries to learn from her mistakes. That's no small thing. Just that one mispronunciation, and my heart is shaken with pity and admiration.

All right then, Ms. B. Here's a story about werewolves, about a woman who — No, you're not interested in werewolves, I can see that. This shelf seems to be all love stories, though, of a sort — I'm sure we can find something here for you. There's one, way up at the top there — no, don't give up, you can reach it. It's about a woman who finds herself falling in

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love with a man who is almost completely superficial. Does he change? Does she? Does she leave him? Not as predictable as Donny and Mrs. Thompson, are they?

21. Do you hear that? A voice, someone calling me. It sounds like...it is, it's the Lord of Story. I leave Ms. B. and hurry through the rooms, books blurring past me on either side. The voice grows louder.

Finally I reach the room where he's standing. He's a tall man, with a cloak that I thought at first was black but later realized is covered in writing — writing that changes constantly, that moves as he moves. A hood covers his face, mostly, but from what little I can see his skin is as dark as his cloak.

You passed the first test, he says. I'm giving you new work now, advancing you from Shelving to Information.

He turns. He opens a door that had not been there a minute ago — and as it closes behind him it fades once more into the wall.

What does he mean? He explained my first job, how to read the codes on the spines, but what does someone who works in Information do? I barely know this place myself.

Well, I help people, I suppose. People like Ms. B. I guide them to the books they're looking for. But that — wouldn't that make me a sort of Muse?

I stand there, transfixed. A Muse, like the Lord of Story himself. Am I ready for a task that huge, that consequential? But he thought I was.

22. Ms. B. is saying something, asking me a question. I force myself out of my trance — my job is to help her, after all. No, I'm afraid I can't say where I'll be when you finish the story, Ms. B. One of these rooms somewhere. Yes, of course you can come look for me. I hope you will.

23. Do you think you'll read the story Ms. B. writes next? Why or why not?

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Michael Blumlein's novels include The Movement of Mountains, X, Y, *and most recently,* The Healer. *Some of his short fiction was collected in* The Brains of Rats, *but he's probably due for a new collection soon. Longtime readers of* F&SF *will no doubt remember his stories "Revenge" (April 1998), "Bestseller" (Feb. 1990), "Paul and Me" (Oct/Nov. 1997), and "Fidelity: A Primer" (Sept. 2000). His "Know How, Can Do," which first appeared in our Dec. 2001 issue, is currently reprinted on our Website. Mr. Blumlein says that his new Website,* www.michaelblumlein.com, *will be up and running by the time you read this. But don't go rushing now to check it out. First, settle in and enjoy this magnificent, edgy, and inventive new novella.*

The Roberts

By Michael Blumlein

— 1 —

LONG BEFORE GRACE, BEFORE Claire and Felicity, before the two men who wrecked his life, there was him and him alone, Robert Fairchild, first and only child of June and Lawrence, warm and cozy in his mother's womb. He was two weeks overdue at birth, as though reluctant to leave that precious, corpuscular, sharply scented, deeply calming place — determined, as it were, to remain attached. When at last his mother, weary of a tenacity that at other, less pressing, times she would come to admire, served notice and forced him out, young Robert, shocked and indignant, cried a storm.

His father was a physicist, an academic devoted to his work, highly respected by his colleagues and rarely at home. He was raised by his mother, who adored him, and he learned, as many sons do, that love bears the face and the stamp of a woman.

He excelled in school and, following in the footsteps of his father,

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chose mathematics as a career. But midway through college he was bitten by another bug and abandoned math for art. First painting, which proved beyond his grasp, then sculpture, which tantalized him. Sadly, his work was never more than mediocre; some of it, by any standard, his own included, was outright ugly. And these were not the days when ugly was beautiful. These were the days when beautiful was beautiful, and beauty reigned supreme.

His failure was discouraging, all the more because he expected to succeed, as he had all his life until then. He lost confidence in himself, a new experience, and on the heels of this his spirits spiraled down. Eventually, he decided to drop out of school. But on the way to deliver his letter of resignation, he ran into a fellow student — literally collided with her. She was standing at the edge of the sidewalk, a sketchpad open, a pencil in hand, utterly absorbed in the rendering of an old stone building for one of her classes.

Her name was Claire. The class was architecture. Their collision marked the beginning of a love affair that lasted just a few short years, but of a career, for Robert, that lasted a lifetime. Everything that was unattainable and wrong in his work as a sculptor was uncannily right in his work, first as a student, then apprentice, architect, as if some slight, but fatal, flaw in his eye, or his compass, had been corrected. For this he credited Claire. She was his first great love. Through her he found his calling. Through her he learned, not incidentally, how sweet and vivifying love could be. She restored his confidence. She invigorated him and inspired his earliest work. In the brief time they were together she gave him everything, it seemed, a man could want, and when at length she left him, citing his self-centeredness and preference for work over her, she gave him something new, the devastating side of love, the heartache and the sorrow. For what she said was true, he had poured his love for her into his work, to a fault, neglecting the real live person. It was a terrible mistake, which he vowed never to repeat. He had a contempt for mistakes, rivaled only by — as an aspiring young architect — his contempt for repetition.

After Claire left, he had an awful time. Guilt, anger, loneliness, self-recrimination, despair: the usual stuff. He couldn't work, and that was worst of all, because his career was just beginning, and he needed work to feel like a man, to feel worth anything. And then in a freak accident he lost

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an eye, and what had seemed bad suddenly got worse. An architect without an eye? How about a bird without a wing? A singer without a throat? He felt castrated.

He couldn't see, or thought he couldn't see. Everything seemed flat and drab and lifeless. There were ways to adjust and compensate, but he wasn't into adjustment, not just yet, he was into bitterness and self-pity, which were new to him and gave him a kind of poisonous satisfaction. It was during this time that he met Julian Taborz, a bioengineer and fledgling entrepreneur, and they began a collaboration that was to culminate in the invention of Pakki-flex®, the so-called "living skin." But that was years away, and at the time there was a real question just how long Robert would last. He was working for a firm, but his work was uninspired. He was getting stress-induced rashes, which itched and boiled and crawled along his skin like a plague. At length he was put on notice as a poor performer, but he couldn't seem to correct himself. With each passing month, the world of architecture, which he adored, seemed to slip further from his grasp. Then he met Felicity, who changed his life.

Felicity was an oculist, which was a little like being a jeweler. She had long, expressive fingers, slate blue eyes, and a sweet ironic laugh. She gave Robert, not his first fake eye, but his first good one, that didn't announce itself from a mile off, bulging like a tumor from its socket, making him look bug-eyed and cartoonish, or half bug-eyed, which was worse. He had developed the habit of averting his face, or, alternatively, whipping off his omnipresent sunglasses and confronting strangers, forcing them to choose where to look and where not to look, willfully inviting their uneasiness, fascination, and disgust. These were angry, spiteful days, and Felicity put them to rest. It was a matter of craftsmanship, which she had in abundance, but equally, it was a matter of caring and empathy, of listening to a client, connecting with him, giving him the look, the picture of himself, he wanted. Felicity had that talent too, and Robert fell for her like a fish for water.

The day she gave him his eye, in a little box, then helped him put it in, then stood beside him at the mirror, proud, almost protective, he was overcome with emotion. He asked if he could see her again. Gently, she refused. He asked if he could at least call her, and she gave him her business card and said, if he was having trouble with his eye, of course. He

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waited two weeks, then made an appointment. She made some minor adjustments, and a month later he was back. Eventually, against her better judgment, she agreed to go out on a date with him. He took her home and showed her the design of a building that, he professed, she had inspired, a frothy concoction of steel and glass, his first new design in many moons. She didn't know quite what to make of it, nor of his attention. He seemed so needy, starved for something she was not at all sure that she, or anyone, could provide. At the same time she was flattered. Several weeks later he showed her another building, also inspired by her, then another, and so it went, until at length he wore her down, overcoming her resistance. He was only a man after all, and if he insisted that she was heaven on earth, who was she to disagree? Putting wariness aside, burying suspicion, she stopped withholding herself, and from there the laws of chemistry, physics, and biology (which, in the absence of compelling forces to the contrary, favored attraction), kicked in. She was already in some ways attached to him, and now that attachment grew. She looked forward to his company. She cared how he felt. And eventually the day arrived when she could no longer deny, nor had any wish to deny, that as near as she could tell, she was in love.

It was evident in every facet of her life. At work, on the street, in the car, the kitchen, the living room, in bed. Robert was as fine a lover as she had known, attentive, responsive, creative, energetic, kind. Unlike many men, he did not despise or fear women, but rather he exalted them, on the whole a more forgivable offense. Felicity was sun and moon to him, and when they were together, he couldn't get enough of her, which made up for his tendency to be with her rather less, now that she desired him, than she would have liked. Thanks to her, his career was on the upswing. The drought of ideas had ended (the rashes as well), and he was now working for himself, working feverishly, frequently missing meals and spending the night — and sometimes two or three nights on end — at the office. Six months after they moved in together he won his first major commission and in quick succession several more, each of which required that he travel. Not uncommonly, he was gone for a week at a time. As his business grew, his travel time increased, until he was away nearly as much as he was home. By this point the press had caught wind of him, "the one-eyed architect," in their thirst for copy suggesting that his missing eye

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conferred a singular and authentic vision, like an extra sense. Privately, Robert would never allow himself to submit to such nonsense; publicly, he was shrewdly dismissive. Celebrity agreed with him and was good for business. He gave interviews. Clients flocked to him. Taxis, airports, and his drafting table saw him more and more; Felicity, less and less.

His love for her never wavered, but it was subsumed by a greater love, and she learned how it felt to be demoted. From sun and moon she went to being but a planet. Sometimes visible, sometimes not, like Venus or Mercury. And like Venus and Mercury, she had no moons to orbit her, and none on the way, because Robert didn't want any. And so, after many years together, she left him, and for the second time in his life he was alone.

For a while he did all right. Professionally, he was thriving, and he had the occasional confectionary fling. In addition, the long collaboration with Julian Taborz had finally reached fruition. Pakki-flex was now on the market, and it was revolutionizing the construction of buildings. A bio-epidermic membrane applied to a matrix of polycarbon activating thread, the "living skin" took the place of traditional roofs and siding. It was responsive to the elements, thickening in winter cold and summer heat, thinning in milder weather. It also changed color, both inside and out: its exterior surface responded to ambient temperature and light; its interior, (if desired), to the prevailing moods of the building's inhabitants. Neither surface required a protective coating, be it shingle, tar, slate, tile, varnish or paint, which was a big money saver. It was flexible, it was durable, it was economical, but its biggest selling point was that it mended itself. The Domome, an award-winning, one-of-a-kind, trophy home topped by a soaring, onion-shaped, Pakki-flex dome, which Robert designed and built for a wealthy patron of the arts, was a consummate example of the product's strengths. It was also an example, hitherto unknown, of its fatal weakness.

Pakki-flex was composed, in part, of cells — living cells, as living cells were needed for it to work its magic. The immunocompetence of these cells, the mechanism by which they protected themselves from harm and guarded the surrounding extra-cellular environment, had been enhanced. In the parlance of the lab these were vigilante cells. Like vigilantes, they were well-armed, and like vigilantes, easily triggered. This served well for incursions of external agents and provocateurs, such as wind, rain, sleet,

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ice, ultraviolet radiation, rodents, bolts of lightning, and flying objects. It served less well when directed inward, and indeed, this same property made the cells susceptible to internal corruption and self-attack. Three months after moving in, on the night of a banquet to entertain their hundred closest friends and celebrate their newest acquisition, the proud owners of the Domome noticed a small bubble in the dome. Over the course of the evening the bubble grew and slowly filled with a pale yellow fluid, which, save for its size, bore a remarkable resemblance to the common blister. By the time dessert was being served (a wonderfully evoked whipped cream, meringue and rum eclair), it encompassed most of the ceiling. The gracious guests, fearful of slighting their hosts, did not begin to flee until the fluid began to drip, and most, mercifully, were well on their way when, with a groan followed by a deep, bassoon-like ripping sound, the waters of the blister burst. As one of the departing guests ruefully remarked, it was as if the house, mimicking the inaugural mood within it, were giving birth.

In the succeeding weeks other reports trickled in. Of ceilings and roofs that puckered but also fissured, ulcerated and cracked. Of walls and siding that peeled, scaled and sloughed off in fat, translucent flakes. The "living skin" was acting, it appeared, as skin did, troubled skin that is, and the culprit, or the cause, seemed to be those residents who suffered skin conditions. Somehow they were triggering these untoward effects. And their conditions were not necessarily active ones; in certain cases, they were not even known. Some of the afflicted had problems lurking in the genome that would not appear until later in life; some had infections acquired in childhood or early adulthood that were dormant and might never appear but were present nonetheless. Others had conditions that came and went; others, conditions so benign as to go unnoticed. All in all, there were a great many occupants with the potential to interact with Pakki-flex and do it harm, and while most who could did not, there was no way of knowing ahead of time who might. At the very least, it seemed to require prolonged daily contact between man and material, which is why the effect had not been noted earlier.

The first lawsuit was settled out of court. The remainder, lumped into a class action suit, dragged on for years and ultimately came near to bankrupting poor Robert. Far worse, though, was the damage to his

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reputation. In professional circles, where the only thing more enjoyable than one's own success was a rival's fall from grace, Pakki-flex became known as "Fairchild's Folly." He lost business. He lost face. The rashes and welts that had plagued him earlier in his life recurred.

It is a common truth that misfortune causes some to rise, others to crack. Robert experienced a slow, steady, painful decline. He tried to work but instead found himself staring at the wall or out the window of his office at the city far below, his city, bustling with the construction of new buildings, fine buildings, but none of *his* buildings. He stared and wondered what had happened. How had he ended up here, in this gloomy, sad, unfortunate and unproductive place? More to the point, how could he get out? The work he'd done, the joy and the pleasure of it, and the recognition he'd received, seemed of a different life and time.

He had dreams of Claire and of Felicity, and he would wake from them feeling old and tired, like a building past its prime. But every so often he would have a different dream, with a different woman in it, nameless, faceless even, but nonetheless familiar to him, the way a certain childhood scent is familiar, deep beneath the skin familiar, rudimentary, intense, longed for yet unknown. These dreams were like whispers, flickers in the dark, and he would often wake from them with a glimmer of hope. And in time, after a number of such dreams, it occurred to him what should have been obvious before. He needed help. Not to put too fine a point on it, but he needed a woman.

In the past it had never been hard for him to meet women, and it wasn't hard now. Women liked him, and what was not to like in a man so charming, so attractive, so victimized by circumstance and so willing — indeed so poised — to put it all behind and reestablish himself? Above all, he liked women, as opposed to disliking them, or distrusting them, or, god forbid, despising them, which for many women was a disincentive to forming a relationship with a man. Robert not only liked the idea of women, he liked the fact of them, he liked to be around and beside them and face to face with them, he liked their company, their loving nature, their adaptability, their strength, their subtlety of thought. Women were the brick and mortar, the bedrock, of his world.

Every woman was beautiful to him, each in her own unique and special way. Throughout his life this had been a constant, a source of

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pleasure and comfort to him, as dependable as breathing, as thought. Or it had been. Now, strangely, this was not entirely the case. Something, it seemed, had changed. Their beauty was still there, but it was beauty in the broad sense, the general sense, the way a forest is beautiful, or a field of waving grass is beautiful, whereas any single tree or stalk, on close inspection, might be flawed. He met women and to his dismay noticed first and foremost their imperfections. This one was too loud, this one too quiet, this one too tall or too short, too bossy, too brassy, too demure. It was as if his vision had changed again, suddenly and inexplicably, so that instead of seeing with one eye, he was seeing with less than an eye. He was seeing through a veil. He was seeing wrong.

He wondered if something had happened to them, to women. Something on a global, catastrophic scale. The idea was not so preposterous, for it was the age of such calamities, mind-numbing environmental cataclysms, often of worldwide proportion. Maybe something in the water or the air had affected women, marring their essential beauty and attractiveness, maybe something in the Earth itself, in the core, a cooling in the red-hot center, the planet's heart, and a subsequent attenuation in the surrounding magnetic fields, a weakening of the poles, a loosening of the forces of attraction. Something to explain this curious, horrific loss. And there were such reports — one could find reports of anything, and especially of disasters — but they did not explain why the birth rate continued to rise, or how men, from even his most casual observation, continued to lust after women. It seemed that he alone was afflicted.

He searched for reasons why. He changed his diet. He started exercising more. He visited a health food store and left with a CD of excruciating postures and meditative chants, along with an armful of pills. He tried everything he could think of and looked everywhere except one place, and then one night he looked there, where a good many others had looked before him and a few had even survived. The mirror.

What he saw was a man in his late thirties, a handsome man with a thick head of hair, strong chin, expressive lips, and a puzzled, somewhat desperate look on his face. The look was centered in the eyes, whose incongruity he had long since grown accustomed to but which now seemed new and disturbing, as though they were at odds with each other, in conflict, the one dull and imbecilic, the other bright and accusatory,

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although the more he looked the more it seemed to be the reverse, that the fake eye, the prosthesis, was boring into the good eye, the true one, challenging it to see clearer, to see better, to see properly.

He thought of work, which had given him such pleasure in the past and which now was so problematic. He thought of Felicity and Claire, both of whom had left him because of his inability to find the proper balance between work and love. Or more precisely, between love of work and love of them. A fine distinction: love, he had found, did not parcel out easily. When it flowed, it had a tendency to overflow, it spilled from one cup effortlessly into another. When there was love, there was enough for all...at least this had been his experience. But not theirs, which made him wonder if perhaps he was confusing love with something else. Euphoria? Hunger? Self-indulgence? Perhaps he had loved, not too much, but too much on his own terms.

It was humbling, especially because he never intended to cause hurt or suffering. But it did seem to happen, and it hurt him in return, and if he could have changed, he would have, and now, by a stroke of luck, or fate, it seemed he had. Finding fault with women was a way to keep from getting involved with them. It was a way to protect them from him, the moral equivalent of wearing a condom. A man had to feel good about wearing a condom. He had to feel good about having morals. And Robert did.

Unfortunately, there remained the problem of not being able to work. Of lacking motivation, inspiration, and desire. And to that there seemed but one solution. For while men were the builders, women were the miracle workers. And so he pressed on.

The weeks went by, stretched into months. He lost track of the number of ads he answered, and of the women who'd answered his, and of dates he'd been on, and of emails and phone calls. He had never met so many women in so short a time in his life — wonderful women, exceptional women, nightmares — and never felt so discouraged. It was Julian, finally, who came to his rescue. There was only so much a friend could bear before intervening.

They met over coffee in a diner by the waterfront, where waitresses on roller skates had once served drive-in cars. Time had not been kind to the building, and in the current frenzy of urban renewal it ran the risk of

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getting a makeover, when what it needed was either to be razed completely or left to die a slow, dignified death of its own funky charm. Julian wore his signature black turtleneck, pleated polyester pants, and tasseled loafers. His walnut-colored hair half hid his ears, softening the boxy geekiness of his thick-framed glasses. Being a lab rat with little money to begin with, he had suffered less than Robert financially when Pakki-flex imploded. Being constitutionally optimistic (a near prerequisite in the world of science and particularly of the lab), he had suffered less emotionally as well. He had followed Robert's decline with both sympathy and chagrin, offering various well-meaning and sometimes outlandish pieces of advice culled from chat rooms, blogs, immersible realities and the like, where he got much of his information, including information about the opposite sex. Women themselves, in the flesh, were more a mystery to him. But all mysteries, sooner or later, yielded to science and technology. This he firmly believed. And science and technology were nothing if not concrete.

"I know a guy," he said.

"A guy?"

"Used to work in the lab next door to me. Now he works for himself. Bit of an oddball. But he knows what he's doing."

"What's that?"

"He's a parthenogeneticist."

Good God, thought Roger. Had it come to that? The idea had crossed his mind, but it seemed too dangerous and risky. It also raised questions about his own august self. In a word, it was humiliating.

"I don't think so, Julian."

"Why not?"

He listed his reasons.

Julian suggested that he was overreacting. The process succeeded much more often than not. Though of course there were no guarantees.

Robert was skeptical. He was also intrigued. "Does he have a catalogue?"

"No. No catalogue."

"But he has his own line."

Julian shook his head. "He only does custom work. Like you. He's not into mass production."

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"Not exactly like me."

Julian shrugged. "Build a house, build a man."

And Robert thought, why not? He'd give it a try. He'd make a man, by which, of course, he meant a woman. What did he have to lose?

THE MAN'S NAME was Stanovič. He worked out of his home, a loft on the second floor of a warehouse in what was once the industrial part of town. It was meant to be a live/work space for artists, but few artists could afford it. Stanovič, who worked in the medium of flesh and blood, could. He met Robert on the street, checked his ID to make sure he was who he said he was, then led him through a heavy steel door up a flight of wooden stairs that creaked beneath his weight, most of which was centered in his chest and shoulders, which were broad as barrels, and his ample belly, which strained like a racehorse against the rein of his belt. He had a pale complexion, close-cropped hair, and sunken snow blue eyes. Beefy forearms and fingers fat as sausages. Had they passed on the street, Robert would have pegged him for a wrestler, a policeman, or a bureaucrat.

At the top of the stairs he stopped and drew a folded white handkerchief from his pocket, using it to wipe the beads of sweat on his forehead and neck that had accumulated from the climb. He then proceeded down a short hall to a door that opened into a room that had all the hallmarks of a bachelor pad. Against one wall was a seaweed green velveteen couch and beside it a faux leather recliner. Together they faced a plasma flat screen the size of a hockey rink. A low glass table littered with dog-eared magazines, stained papers, and plastic discs sat atop a shag carpet the color of mud. There were two other doors in the room, one in a long wall that did not reach the ceiling and seemed more a partition. Stanovič made his way to the other door, where he paused, then, speaking over his shoulder as though to avoid the effort or inconvenience of turning, offered Robert a beer. It was early in the day, and Robert was not an early drinker, but in the interest of bonhomie he accepted. Stanovič disappeared, and a minute later returned with two tall, frosted glasses. He handed one to Robert.

"Talking is thirsty work," he said, presumably a forecast, for as yet he had said scarcely anything. Lifting his glass, he took a long hard swallow. "You have the advance?"

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He spoke with an accent. German? No, warmer, more southerly. Balkan maybe. Robert, who had built a hospital in the ruins of Sarajevo, handed him an envelope, which contained a tidy sum in mostly borrowed cash, the first, if all went well, of three installments.

"Maybe I should tell you why I'm here," he said.

Stanovič glanced in the envelope and at the same time raised a hand to silence him. "Please. I will speak first. Afterwards, if you have something to say, you will tell me. We will listen to you."

Another pull on the glass, followed by a fastidious, almost dainty, patting of the lips with his handkerchief.

"First, I know why you're here. There is only one reason why anyone is here, including myself. Second, you must prepare yourself for serious work. We do not go on picnic. No, my friend. The harder you work, the better the result, the more satisfactory. Anything less and there will be disappointment. That I promise you. One hundred percent promise, and I tell you why. It's easy to make someone from scratch. No big deal. No problem. It was easy enough the old-fashioned way, and it's easier now. The trick is to make the right someone, and the trick of that is to know what you want. And that, my friend, takes work. And why is that? I tell you. Because you may know what you want, but then you may only think you know, and on deeper inspection, deeper searching of the soul, you may discover that you don't know nearly enough. So that is what we work on, what you know and what you don't know you know and what you need to know, and what you think you know but is really mistake. And I tell you why we do this, because if we don't, we end up with a mediocre product. Something shiny maybe, but it scratches in a minute, and in a minute more it falls apart. And then who's happy? Not you. Not me. What a waste, eh? It belongs in the swimming pool." He paused, then gave a chuckle. "You know what I mean, the swimming pool?"

Robert shook his head.

"You look around, you'll see. People swimming, going nowhere. Like fishes in tank. And not just these fishes, but what they swim in. It's a pool...." He hesitated, knitting his brows. "Can I say a cesspool? A cesspool of mediocre fishes."

It was unclear to Robert what he was referring to. The world at large? The masses, disdain for which was not uncommon among professionals,

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especially thwarted, marginalized ones? Or did he mean his own particular world, the world of parthenogenetics, and if so, Robert wondered how he could say, much less know, that most creations were second-rate. Supposedly, manmade, designer humans were indistinguishable from natural born ones, but maybe they weren't. Maybe there was some telltale sign that was obvious to someone in the business, hidden to everyone else. Now that he thought about it, there were designer lines of humans, like designer shoes or designer clothes, with certain recurring and recognizable features and traits. Viewed separately, in the company of natural humans, a single such individual might not stand out, but viewed together, as in a collection, they were clearly related, variations on a theme, the theme of utility, say, athleticism, prurience, geekiness, smarts.

"I have no interest in making automatons," Stanovič said with contempt. "If what you want is that, someone to do what you say and nothing else, to wait your table, take off your shoes and socks and then her panties, you go to someone else. Same deal if all you want is pretty face. Anyone can make this person. It's hack work. I have better things to do with my time."

What those things were he did not disclose, and the tenor of his voice did not invite inquiry. He finished what remained of his beer, which seemed to calm him.

"Here you get better than that. More spirit, more roundness, more character, more unique. An original person. You know what I mean original? Someone you want to see more than once. Again and again and again you want to see this person. Maybe you can't think of anything else."

Robert liked the idea, though it sounded a bit extreme. "I'm not sure I want to be obsessed."

Stanovič shrugged, as though this were out of his hands.

"I want to love her," Robert said simply, "and I want her to love me. And inspire me. And not be hurt by me. That's key."

"You want someone impervious to hurt?"

"Not impervious, but resilient, and strong."

"You want a woman."

"Yes. Of course. I've said that." Only after the words were out of his mouth did he realize that it was not a question so much as a recommendation.

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"Women are difficult."

"To make?"

"Yes."

"More difficult than men?"

"Men are difficult too. We do better with women. We have a higher success rate. Better results."

"Why is that?" asked Robert, and for this received a lecture in the fundamentals of filigree mo-bi, which Stanovič was more than happy to dispense and which quickly blossomed into something so labyrinthine and obtuse that it could have come from the workshop, the very kitchen, of Mother Nature herself. Robert was impressed, though truth to tell, he had his own theory, which, frankly, he preferred. To wit: women had so many strengths to begin with, so many virtues and so few inherent flaws, that in making one, you were bound to be close to perfection. This seemed only common sense. How close depended, he presumed, on making as few mistakes as possible.

Upon hearing this, Stanovič stared at him, as though wondering what hole this sad, benighted creature had crawled out of, and whether to repeat himself and whether it would matter.

"You are an architect?"

"Yes."

"You build for people?"

"That's right."

"Women as well as men?"

"Yes. Both."

"And you talk to them, these women? You meet with them? You get to know?"

"Of course."

He seemed to find this hard to believe, given what he had just heard, but he had a scientist's curiosity, and he studied Robert as he might a conundrum or thorny biologic puzzle. Slowly, his expression changed from incredulity to amusement and then, remarkably, appreciation.

He raised his glass. "We make a toast. To you, my friend, and all you desire. To beauty and truth. To everything you want and nothing you don't want. To satisfaction and hard work."

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It took three weeks, three grueling, intensive, invasive, exhausting weeks. Robert had no idea how much he would be called upon to unearth, process, and decide. He thought he knew, for example, how he wanted his creation to look, which was the easiest part, the appearance, and he did, but he didn't know nearly enough. After spending just a few hours with Stanovič, he understood what it was like for his own clients, trying to put an idea and a vision — for a dream house, say — into words. His personal vision had eyes and lips and limbs and shape, but she was also a feeling, and this feeling, rather than sharpening her features, made her harder to define, as if to observe her too closely changed her, blurred her, made her more intangible and abstract. It was not that she was vague but rather elusive, her personality most of all. Affectionate, cheerful, playful, intelligent...these were words he used to describe her, and they did and at the same time missed the mark. It wasn't that they lacked meaning but that their meaning was relative, subjective, open to interpretation and therefore imprecise. It was like being a foreigner with a limited vocabulary. A million different women could be spun from his words.

Stanovič was used to this in his clients and had ways to get a more detailed, exact, and specific picture. Some of these involved instruments that he attached to the body. Some involved deep, internal probes: He used drugs to unlock Robert's unconscious and other drugs to keep that unconscious from babbling incomprehensibly, to prevent it, in effect, from running amok. He used retrievable cortical and limbic retroviruses to identify and reproduce embedded engrams, and memory magnets to extract fluid neuronal circuits and fixed ganglionic nexi, the so-called "cloudburst webs." His goal was to get at Robert's core, the essence of who he was, and work from that, inside out, as it were. This required a certain shaking up of the parts. As an architect Robert understood: a building got built from the bottom up, not the top down. Even so, he dreaded these sessions. They left him feeling raw, weak, and disoriented, and it took him days to recover and feel himself again.

As if this weren't enough, he had homework to do as well. Chins and cheeks and hips and breasts and skin tone and skin type and hair and height and weight and musculature to look at, gaits and postures and mannerisms to peruse, voices to listen to, laughter to hear, smells — of the mouth, the neck, the belly, the privates — to sample. But hardest of all, by far, were

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the personalities, which he was given to assess and which he also concocted on his own and had to interact with in simulated sessions. Hundreds of them, until his head was ready to burst, thousands, like swatches of paint, selecting, rejecting, revising, until he could barely tell one from the other and was ready to accept — or dismiss — them all.

Finally, though, the work was done. Stanovič had what he needed, and Robert had nothing more to do but wait. He passed the time walking around the city, making a circuit of its neighborhoods and taking in all the new construction, which stirred up feelings of excitement, envy, and appreciation, along with the deep and chilling fear of being left behind. He loved his city and longed to build something for it, something timeless and fine. It seemed impossible that he never would, much less that he would never design and build any building whatsoever, except for the fact that he wasn't able to, and no one was asking for him. With Stanovič there was hope, but it was a sliver of hope. Still, with each passing day he found himself clinging to it ever more fiercely.

At last the call came, and as before, Stanovič met him at the front door. He looked tired and out of sorts, and save for a curt "Come in," he didn't speak. For a second Robert panicked, fearing something awful. His mind raced as they climbed the stairs. Trapped behind Stanovič's plodding, silent bulk, he had ample time to second-guess himself and spin disturbing fantasies.

Finally they reached the top and then the living room, where Stanovič told him to wait, disappearing through the door in the long wall. The room smelled of stale beer. There were empty bottles on the table. The television was on but muted. On the couch was a rumpled yellow blanket and a lumpy pillow.

A minute later Stanovič returned.

"She's a little shy. They're all a little shy at first."

He called through the door, and at length, noiselessly, she appeared. Stanovič did not attempt to hide his pleasure. Nor his admiration. All trace of weariness was gone.

Robert took her in at a single glance and opened his mouth to say something — introduce himself, welcome her, anything — but found he couldn't speak. She was too beautiful to speak to. Stunningly, heart-stoppingly beautiful. Composure was simply not an option.

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"Meet Grace," said Stanovič, the name that Robert had chosen for her. He held out his hand, palm upturned, and with a patriarch's pride and the gentlest, most tender of gestures, presented her. "Grace, meet Robert."

— 2 —

IT IS ONE of the imponderables of a man's life that not every woman he loves sees fit to love him back. Robert loved Grace from the moment he laid eyes on her, but this was no guarantee that Grace would love Robert. Stanovič had warned him of this, and several anxious weeks passed before he could say with any certainty that she did. How did he know? How does any man know? By the looks she gave him, by the lift in her voice when he entered the room, by the way she couldn't keep her hands to herself or take her eyes off him. And by the words she whispered, and how, like a colt, she nuzzled against his neck, and like a rabbit, she nibbled his ear. And by the happiness he felt, the elation, the euphoria, the relief.

How to describe her? He couldn't, not really, except in this way: she was beautiful — in mind, body and spirit — to a degree that she made every woman around her beautiful, and at the same time every woman paled before her; she surpassed them all. He longed to be with her and only her, and she longed to be with him. This made life easy, for togetherness was something they could achieve. They slept together, ate together, whiled away their time together. They took a trip to the desert, where they hiked and baked in the heat together; to Rome, where they sat in cafés and explored the ancient streets together; to the mountains, where they climbed a peak and stood atop the world. Each day, impossibly, they fell deeper in love. And little by little, what was dead inside of Robert, or dormant, began to stir.

There was a piece of undeveloped land not far from Robert's office, one of the few left in the city. It was a site he had always coveted (he and every architect in town): three flat acres south of the city's heart, at the edge of a long, bifurcated inlet of the ocean, empty save for weeds, unused railroad tracks, and two abandoned wharves. Over the years he had

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envisioned any number of projects blossoming here — housing, a hospital, a corporate headquarters, a park — every one of them a pipedream, as the land was not for sale. Still, it never failed to excite his imagination...never, that is, until his imagination went south. For more than a year he had avoided the site, as it did him more harm than good. It was a stone in his chest, this place, a reminder of better times, and he would have continued to give it a wide berth had not Grace requested to see it. He agreed, for her.

The day they chose, in early fall, broke warm and sunny. The blue of the sky was rivaled only by the deeper, steelier blue of the water. Fancying a picnic, Grace brought cheese and a bottle of wine; Robert, at her insistence, carried a blanket. Much of the rusty fence that surrounded the site was down or missing, as were signs forbidding entrance. There were several well-worn paths, used primarily by birders. Grace chose one, but after a short while she veered off into the weeds and waist-high grass, searching for something more private. Robert followed stoically, halting when she did, in a clearing near the water.

"How about here?"

"Fine."

She waited for him to spread the blanket.

"Robert?"

"Yes?"

"Is something the matter?"

It was a struggle for him. The site stirred up feelings he preferred not to face.

"Do you want to spread that thing?"

He spread it.

Grace sat down, depositing her canvas bag. The city surrounded them on three sides — skyscrapers to the north, homes and warehouses to the south and west — but from the blanket these were invisible. She stretched out her legs.

"This is nice."

Robert, who had remained standing, gave a wooden nod.

"Our own little hiding place."

"It's hardly hidden."

"It is from down here."

He glanced at her.

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"Come sit."

"I used to think of all the things I could do with this place. All the things I could build. It was like an invitation, a magnet, for my dreams."

She reached for his hand.

"Not that I could ever do anything about them. Still, it was fun."

"You felt free."

He looked around, shrugged, then sat.

"Cheese?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

She poured some wine into a plastic cup, which they shared. After a while she lay down, arms at her sides, eyes closed. She wore a halter top and shorts. Her skin was smooth and tawny. Her great bushel of hair pillowed her head, shining like a halo. Robert began to lose himself in her face.

"We could be the only people left on Earth," she said dreamily. "This could be our last day together."

"Don't say that."

She turned on her side. "What would you do?"

"What I am."

"You'd look at me?"

He nodded.

"What else?"

"Make love to you."

She smiled. "What else?"

When he didn't answer, she told him to lie back and close his eyes.

"What do you see?" she asked.

"The backs of my eyes."

"What do you feel?"

He took a moment. "Warm."

"I'm going to tell you how I feel. Happy. Grateful. Lucky. Beautiful. Alive. In love."

"That's a lot of things."

"I'm a complicated person."

After a time he said, "I see something else."

She waited.

"It's hard to describe."

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She waited longer.

"I'm not sure that I can."

It was a building in the form of a fountain, made entirely of glass and erupting from the ground like a geyser, in what seemed a froth of light. It was fixed in place but also fluid, gravity-defying, straining against the constraints of space and time. And the way it played with light, concentrating it, reflecting it, diffusing it. It seemed spun half of reality, half of dream. He had never seen or imagined anything like it.

He sat up and opened his eyes. He blinked and rubbed them, but the vision remained. It was pulsing now, which was the beating, the pounding, of his heart. He got to his feet and started walking.

"Robert?"

He didn't answer.

Maybe, she thought, he hadn't heard. She called again, then rose.

He was halfway to the car, and Grace wondered if he was going to stop. Clearly, he was possessed by something, and having lived and waited with him for this moment, this spark, she felt a quiver of excitement. She was pleased to see him so engrossed and engaged, as pleased as anyone who in the blink of an eye becomes an afterthought. Forgiveness flowed through her like honey, and like honey, forgiving him for leaving her behind without a word was sweet. It was a new experience for her, being left, and she was not a person quick to judge or take offense. Especially not toward a man for whom she felt such love. If it happened again, she would figure out what to do. She was made to think for herself, just as she was made, with craftsmanlike precision, not to be hurt.

From that day forward Robert overflowed with ideas. New ideas, bold ideas, crazy, romantic, incredible ideas, bubbling out of him, pouring, gushing, like being in the love for the first time. And everybody loves a lover. And everybody wants a piece. He starting getting jobs again, small jobs at first. Then bigger ones. Before long he was up to his neck in work.

He worked seven days a week, as much as he could at home. Typically he labored deep into the night, breaking for dinner, which Grace cooked, and often for an hour or two in the afternoon, when he and she would do something together, take a walk, explore a neighborhood, pull the curtains and make love. Occasionally he would break in the morning too,

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roused by the sound of her moving in the house, distracted by the thought of her, the smell of her, which he could summon even in her absence, her smile, her warmth, her sweet and loving nature, her embrace.

It was a wonderful thing to be working again, to be noticed and sought out. More wonderful in some ways than his initial success. He was older and wiser. He appreciated what he had, all the more for knowing how quickly and utterly it could be gone. He felt lucky: if birth (whether by natural means or by nature once removed), was a miracle, then rebirth was nothing less than an act of grace.

It would have been hard to say who was happier. Robert had the happiness of a man, inexplicably crippled, restored to health. A man from whom the curse (and who had uttered it? and by what power? what right?) was lifted, gone. Grace had the happiness of the lover at her beloved's good fortune, the satisfaction of having been part and parcel of that good fortune, the joy in the knowledge of the strength of love and all that love can achieve. She was so good at loving, so generous, so thorough and complete. If love were a violin, she played it with the finest tone, the deepest understanding, the most impeccable technique. There was nothing that rivaled it in her world, nor would it be contained. Like a rain-swollen river will spill beyond its banks, her love spilled beyond the principal object of her affection. She loved animals. She loved music. She loved puzzles, children, shoes, and conversation. She was also very fond of books.

In this she resembled Robert's mother, an avid, indiscriminate reader, and the resemblance went further, for Grace was also fond of reading in bed, waiting for Robert to join her, and also in a certain armchair, with a curved upholstered back that had been in the family for generations. His grandmother had owned it, then his mother, who had passed it on to him. It sat in a corner of his house, waiting for someone like Grace, who fit it perfectly, and a lasting image for him was of her in the chair, lost in a book, lifting her head and gazing out the window, pondering something she had just read, perhaps relating it to herself, perhaps to him. She had a past, in the sense that she had memories, and she also lacked a past, in the sense that these memories were artificial; they had been given to her. Like all memories, there were gaps that had to be bridged. And like all memories, they gave birth to new thoughts and memories, and they were colored by

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her state of mind, which they also contributed to. Some, of course, stood out more than others. Once, when Robert was watching her unseen from a doorway, her head bent, her hair hanging loose about her face, she lifted a hand and unconsciously began twirling a lock around a finger. This was a physical memory, a memory of the body, and it made him smile, and he felt a great wave of affection, for it was something his mother used to do.

But these moments, of simply watching and enjoying her, were rare. As his star rose, he didn't have time for them. He worked late. He traveled extensively. He was gone nearly as much as he was home.

It was a busy life, too busy, and he told her so again and again, as though by acknowledging it, he could mitigate the consequences. He missed her, sometimes desperately. He wished it were different, but what could he do?

And what could Grace do but look after herself when he was away and welcome him back on his return? He was in the grip of something, and she admired him for it, and sometimes pitied him too. And the pity made her love him more, but respect him, perhaps, a little less. It was an oversight, no doubt, in her design. That, or — heaven forbid — a flaw, and she sought to mend it with kindness.

"I wish it were different too," she told him one night. He had just returned from a month-long absence. "But it isn't. Let's be honest."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be."

"But I am."

"What I mean is, it's okay. I understand. I get it."

Robert was exhausted, but her frankness and acceptance always had a way of reviving him. "You do?"

"Yes. Of course. I'm happy for you."

"I don't want to hurt you, Grace. That's the last thing I want to do."

"Don't be silly. How can you hurt me?"

"By neglecting you."

"Are you?"

"I worry about it."

"I know you do."

"I worry that you'll get tired of waiting. That you'll get bored."

"And if I did?"

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"I worry that you'd leave me."

"I won't."

"It's happened before."

She looked surprised. "Has it? I don't recall ever having left."

"Not you."

"Well then. You see? You're worrying for nothing."

These bouts of insecurity were not new to her. They happened frequently after prolonged absences, and she understood his need for reassurance.

"You know how much I depend on you," he said.

She stroked his arm and kissed him on the cheek and followed that with a tender look that somehow ended at his artificial eye, which stared at her sphinx-like. She had an urge to pluck it out, which seemed scandalous, and then make love to him, which was long overdue and seemed like fun.

"I'm so proud of you," she said.

His mind, involuntarily, had drifted from thoughts of her to work. "For getting the Eisenmenger commission?"

"No, baby. For knowing your blind spot."

It took him a second to recover, which he did magnificently. "Which one?"

She smiled.

"I have so many."

"Not really."

"I love it when you smile."

"Just one or two."

"Like taking you for granted."

A moment passed.

"Do you?" she asked mildly.

"No. I don't. I don't mean to. But I get busy. I forget. Sometimes it just happens."

"Do you have another woman, Robert?"

The question took him by surprise. He was shocked and dismayed. "No. Never."

"I'd understand it if you did."

"I don't. And what do you mean, you'd understand?"

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"Don't get angry. You like women."

"I like you."

What she meant was he liked attention and love. And as good as she was at providing these, as custom-made and streamlined for the purpose, she was only one person. This seemed fairly obvious to her, and it gave her an idea how to ease the tension and guilt he felt for being absent so much, but it would take some planning and time. Meanwhile, there was more pressing business, which she grasped with her keen, intuitive, state-of-the-art, female mind.

She draped an arm around his neck and laid her lips, her hot breath, against his ear. "You know, we've never made love completely naked."

"Sure we have."

She shook her head, transfixed by his eye, its cool ceramic machine-like stare, while her fingers toyed with the topmost button of his shirt. "I mean completely. Without anything on. Anything not ours. Anything we weren't born with."

It seemed a strange comment, and when he understood what she meant, an even stranger request. Reluctantly, he agreed to it; and when the eye was out, he struggled not to feel self-conscious, with the result that he broke out in a rash. This happened on occasion, these stress-induced eruptions, and this one was worse than most. Within minutes his face and neck were covered with hot and itchy welts. Ordinarily, he took medication for something this severe, without which the rash could last for hours. But this time Grace intervened. She brought him ice, which she applied with a sure and gentle hand, and spoke to him in the most soothing and hypnotic of voices. And for the first time in memory, the welts faded on their own. Or rather they faded under the ministry of Grace. And in the wake of this, this miracle, he was overcome with gratitude and love for her. She was showing sides of herself that he'd neither seen nor imagined, and he didn't want to lose her and knew that, despite himself, he was on a path that might. And he made a vow, silent but absolute, that he would not repeat his past mistakes. He would do whatever it took to keep her, and if this meant giving more of himself, he would give more. And if this somehow proved beyond him (as self-improvement, in the surest hands, could), he would give of himself, and, if necessary, give of himself profoundly, in some other way.

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These words would come back to haunt him, but that night — and the following days and nights — he couldn't have done more to live up to them. He was with Grace as much as humanly possible, putting all but the most urgent business aside. He discovered, or rediscovered, how fine love was, and how finer it was to be the lover than the beloved, to give than receive, and how being the recipient, the beloved, that was great too. Everything was great, and when he returned to work, there was greatness there, in his insight, vision, and execution, how everything just flowed. Not a problem in the world, other than missing Grace, which he compensated for by calling her incessantly when he was on the road and making time to be with her when he was home.

But one day he missed a date, which he compounded by forgetting to call. A week later, it happened again, and that night he didn't come home until after she had gone to bed. Little by little the futon in his office began to see more use. Increasingly, they communicated by email or phone. And before long, like an untended field, life had reverted to what it was.

It wasn't that he didn't want to be with her. He did, sometimes more than he could bear. But work wouldn't allow it, and he couldn't say no to work. It had a power over him that he dared not deny. Yet things could not go on the way they were. This he knew with certainty. Something had to be done or he would lose his Grace, just as sure as he had lost the others. Her birthday was approaching, and perhaps an answer lay there.

What, he wondered, could that answer be? Something more than words, vain hopes and hollow vows, here one day, gone the next. Something real, lasting, tangible, concrete. An offering, he thought, a gift to show that he understood what she was going through, that he sympathized, that he apologized, and above all, that he loved her and wanted to set things right. What kind of gift could do all that? Was there something that she needed? Wanted? That was paramount. What did his Grace, his poor, neglected, beloved Grace, want? In the whole wide world what did she want more than anything?

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to him, Grace — with all the wisdom, incentive and desire of a woman put on Earth to love her man and to help him in times of trouble, a woman with a job to do, a woman, like all the

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best women, without a selfish bone in her body — was hatching a birthday plan of her own.

The day arrived. Robert could barely contain his excitement. He had found the perfect gift. He knew he had. It wasn't cheap, and it hadn't been easy to arrange, which in the end made it even better. He took Grace out to dinner, an elegant, candlelit affair, and could scarcely keep from telling her. For Grace it was a new experience. She had never had a birthday before and was on unfamiliar ground. On the one hand, she didn't understand the fuss; on the other, she liked the feeling of being special, one of a kind, the flattery, the compliment, the harmless deceit. Robert was in high spirits, and she liked that too, save for a certain stridency in his manner, a tautness in his otherwise handsome and fluid charm, like a violin string tuned a quarter tone sharp. She worried a little about this gift of his and the expectation attached to it. She would have to do more, and possibly a good deal more, than merely like it.

Dinner was a tour de force of taste and presentation, and for dessert there was a frosted heart-shaped cake. When it came, with a single candle planted in its center, the other diners glanced over, most taking care not to stare. Robert invited Grace to make a wish.

She gave him a blank look.

"It's a tradition," he explained.

She didn't know of it, which was no great cause for alarm. There were gaps in her knowledge, like missing teeth in an otherwise fully functional comb. A simulated upbringing, however thorough, did not compare to a real one, which in dedicated hands was known to be error- and trouble-free.

"I don't have a wish."

"Everybody has a wish."

"I have what I want."

"Everything?"

It was a game. Now she understood. A strange one, where he seemed to be inviting her dissatisfaction.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"More than I can say."

"Then yes. The answer's yes. I do."

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Between them the candle's flame burned soft and straight, while little blobs of rosy wax accumulated at its base, so that it seemed that a hole was appearing in the heart.

"Everybody's waiting," Robert whispered.

She glanced around. He was right. The room seemed poised for her reply, the men especially, as though they had more at stake than the women, a greater need to believe in this granting-of-wish tradition. It was also possible — and from their avid expressions she thought it likely — that what they really desired, these men, desired most, was that the women believe in it.

"You're asking for something I don't have," she said softly.

"No wishes? No hopes? Not one?"

She hoped for happiness. She hoped for fun. She hoped that he would stop pestering her and that love would rule the world.

"There. Shall I tell you?"

His hand shot up, palm outward, as though to ward her off. "No. Don't. It won't come true if you do." A moment passed, and then he smiled. "But I think I know."

"I hope you do."

They held each other's eyes, and Grace found she had another wish, that the two of them could be spirited away instantly. She chided herself for being greedy.

"The candle," said Robert.

"Yes?"

"Blow it out."

She did, to hearty applause.

Later, he took her home, halting just inside the door, where he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her. "I love you, Grace. Happy birthday. It's time, I do believe, for your present."

"I have a present for you."

"For me? Why?"

"Because I love you too, silly."

He shook his head in wonder and affection. Who was he to deserve such a woman? How lucky could one man be? He asked her to close her eyes, then left the room. A minute later, heart thumping, he returned with his gift. He took a moment to admire it and another to rid himself of

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a final, lingering doubt, the smallest — really, the most trivial — of misgivings.

"You can open them now."

She did, then did more, her eyes widening, her jaw dropping, her hands rising to her mouth. She made a sound. Amazement vied with disbelief.

"Surprise!" cried Robert.

"It's...it's...."

"What?"

Him. It was him. Same face, same body, same everything.

Robert was beaming. "Happy birthday."

"Happy birthday," his duplicate repeated in the exact same voice.

Grace was speechless.

"Do you like it?"

She nodded.

The absence of audible appreciation suggested that, in fact, she might not. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"You don't."

"No...no...I do. I love it. It's perfect. It's just...."

"What?"

Funny. It was funny. Hilarious even. She wanted to laugh but of course she couldn't. Instead she said, in all honesty, "It's a beautiful gift. You know me better than anyone."

"But?"

"But nothing. You're amazing, Robert. It's like you read my mind."

"Did I?"

"Like a telepath." She had to deal with her own doubt now, which had not been present previously. Fortunately, having been built, on general principle, to resist doubt's corrosive influence, this did not take long.

"My turn now," she announced brightly. "Wait here."

She started out of the room, then stopped, gesturing toward the duplicate. "Does he have a name?"

"Ask him," said Robert.

"Do you have a name?"

"Robert," he said.

Grace stared at him, then at Robert, then back. "You wait too."

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"We'll have to work on the name," Robert said after she'd gone.

His duplicate was about to reply, when Grace returned. "Close your eyes. Both of you."

"You didn't have to get me anything," said Robert. "You really didn't. Not on *your* birthday."

"I like presents," said the other Robert.

"No peeking," said Grace, bringing her gift into the room. Like his, hers wasn't cheap, but at the time she ordered it, then picked it up, it seemed worth every penny. Now, with Robert's gift to her, it seemed worth a little less, and also, paradoxically, a little more.

"You can open them now."

Robert did, then gasped.

Robert No. 2 burst out laughing.

As instructed, Grace's gift stepped forward and extended his hand to Robert. "Hello. I'm pleased to meet you."

Several seconds passed before Robert did the decent thing and took the hand.

"What fun," said Robert No. 2.

"I didn't get your name," said Robert.

"Let me guess," said No. 2.

"Quiet," barked Robert, and for an instant the two of them locked eyes.

"Please don't fight," said Grace.

The new addition seemed to share her sentiment. He placed himself between the two men, and to Grace the effect was overwhelming. Her eyes seemed to be playing tricks on her. She felt dizzy.

"I'm sorry," the new man told Robert. "I should have introduced myself right off." He paused, then grinned. "But really. Do I have to?"

— 3 —

STRICTLY SPEAKING, the three of them were not identical. Robert No. 2, who insisted on being called No. 1, differed from Robert No. 3, who didn't care what he was called as long as everybody got along, for the simple reason that he was created by the original Robert and designed to be as close to the original as possible. No. 3 started out with the same raw

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materials but was created by Grace (who herself was created by Robert), and while she did everything in her not inconsiderable power to duplicate her man, there were differences. Some were unavoidable; others, cautiously planned. And while she never would have been so crass or unfeeling or boastful to speak it aloud, in the quiet of her heart she did allow herself a touch of pride in having made, in her modest opinion, improvements.

No. 3 was more talkative than 1 or 2. He was more accommodating, more domestic, more attuned to others than himself. Good for a chat over tea or coffee. Good for a drive. Good for watching TV sit-coms or dramas with.

No. 2 was more project-oriented. He liked to do things more than talk about them. He had ambitions. He liked to stay busy. Barely a day went by that he didn't wake up with a plan.

The two of them shared a room and got along surprisingly well. More importantly, they got along with Grace, and she got along with them. They enjoyed each other as a threesome, and Grace enjoyed each of them individually. She and No. 3 liked to talk — about books, music, people, almost anything — and go for walks, or else stay at home and putter around the house. She and No. 2 (or No.1, as he would have it) also went on walks, but they were walks with a purpose, more along the lines of outings with a clear end in mind. They went to movies. They attended public events. One of these led them to join a political campaign. Another, to enroll in a tennis class.

Initially, she'd been concerned that she would feel overwhelmed. And certainly she was busy, sometimes too busy, but the Roberts could and did take care of themselves. Her real concern was that Robert would feel this way, that he would have a negative reaction to the sudden doubling of bodies in the house, feel cramped, or worse, claustrophobic. But after several months there was little sign that he did. True, he tended to avoid the men, but this was because, he explained, they were meant for her. They couldn't very well do their job if he kept intruding. When they did cross paths, he was cordial, although it was always a little strange. Especially with No. 2, who as often as not met him with a smug, self-satisfied grin, as though in possession of some secret joke. Robert was always a little testy and guarded around 2.

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As for letting them do their job, he was less successful than he might have been. Instead of spending less time with Grace, which his (and her) gift was expressedly meant to facilitate, he spent more, hovering around her on one pretext or another, as though the last thing in the world he wanted was to leave. It was the classic story: relieved of obligation, he felt free to be himself, and that self wanted nothing more than what it had in its possession all along. His desire for Grace was greater than ever. She had never appealed to him more.

But work appealed to him too, and in time his attention returned to it. The men, of course, were meant for him as much as her; they were his gift too. They allowed him the freedom to work if and when and how he wanted. And what he wanted, at a certain point, was to submerge himself in work, to give himself up to it completely. And he did, surrendering in much the same way, at other times, he surrendered to women.

Julian was back in his life, with a new pitch. Or rather a recycled version of an old one. Pakki-flex had been a disaster, and both of them had suffered, though Robert, having more invested in nearly every way, had suffered more. For a while Julian had tried to solve the problem of Pakki-flex's instability, but eventually he gave up. In his hands, at least, it would not be solved. Shortly afterwards, he left the world of the lab altogether, exchanging it for the world of business. The rigor of science was replaced by the rigor of the marketplace. The language was different, but the skill set was similar. He had been moving in this direction for quite some time.

He got a job with a venture capitalist firm, scouting and evaluating biotech startups. Pakki-flex remained a thorn in his side, and from time to time he thought of the buildings that had been built with it, wondering if there weren't something that could be done with them. Most of the public ones had been torn down as either nuisances, liabilities, or outright hazards, but a few of the homes, now abandoned, remained standing. Every so often some journalist with nothing better to do wrote an article about them. Most were disparaging, but recently Julian had come across something different and unusual. The writer had a background in design, and he wrote of the Pakki-flex buildings as a cultural phenomenon, objects not necessarily to be lived in or to be considered as having practical, literal use. Rather, they should be understood as figures of speech, as emblems — icons even — of a social life and need that transcended utility. A sort

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of biosemiotic imperative. Works of form, not function; of flux, not stasis. Works, essentially, of art.

There were links from the article to websites with photographs of existing Pakki-flex homes, all in various stages of puckering, sloughing, and weepage. The one that caught Julian's attention was a ranch house in Southern California at the edge of the Mojave desert. Beside it was a flashing neon sign announcing tours through "The Nightmare House" by a former resident, a bona fide survivor, who had "lived through Hell." On an adjacent plot was a standard cinder-block home with a more hastily constructed sign: "See the Amazing Three-headed Chicken!" With a click you could watch a twenty-second clip of the Pakki-flex do its thing for a busload of amazed tourists and with another click order tickets. Since its inception the website had gotten an astonishing fifty thousand hits.

Julian stared for a long time at the screen. He made some notes, and over the course of the next few weeks he made more. He talked to people, then flew to several major cities and talked to more people: city planners, private developers, art and museum directors, philanthropic organizations. Back home he met with realtors and consulted his firm's tax attorney. At length he put together a proposal, sat on it for a week, reworked it, waited, reworked it again, and finally presented it to his partners. They were not wholly unprepared, having been memoed, but they were a bit taken aback by the scope of what he conceived. Being prudent men, they took a good long while getting back to him.

When they did, Julian put in a call to Robert. He had a business proposition, and there was no one else he'd remotely considered for the job. Robert agreed to meet but warned him that, whatever it was, he wouldn't possibly be able to accept. He had more business than he knew what to do with, including a project in Brazil and another in Dubai. Julian was unfazed, and two weeks later they met in Robert's office. Located in the heart of town, it was spacious, neat, airy, and six hundred feet off the ground. The view from it, to the south and east, once sweeping, had been progressively pinched by competing high-rises. The sky was now represented by vertical slits of blue. There was a shadowy quality to the light that had not been present previously, and less reason to look outside, as if the eye had been requested — indeed, had been required — to turn inward.

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After exchanging pleasantries, Julian wasted little time.

"We need a house to house a house," he said smoothly, concealing his pleasure at the obviously rehearsed line. He pulled a photo from his briefcase and handed it to Robert. "This house."

It was the Domome.

"I thought they tore it down."

"Nope. Didn't."

Robert stared at the photo, then looked up. "What kind of house?"

"A big one." Julian paused. There had been a slight alteration in his manner since his change of career. A dramatizing. He was, in addition to everything else, a salesman now.

"A museum, Robert."

"A museum."

"Yes."

"For what?"

"For the Domome. For Pakki-flex. For you, Robert. For art."

"An art museum."

"Yes. Art and architecture. The Domome will be the centerpiece."

"Ridiculous."

"It's not."

"No?"

"No. Not at all."

Robert considered for a moment. "It's not only ridiculous, Julian. It's unseemly. It's also idiotic. And, I should add, insane."

Julian, of course, had expected this. Robert more than anyone had been wounded by the Pakki-flex debacle, and he wouldn't be keen on reminding people of it, much less bringing one of the actual homes back into the public eye. Never mind that the Domome, with or without Pakki-flex, was a stunning piece of architecture. It had failed as a home. An architect juggled form and function, function and form, and he succeeded only by melding both. It was almost the worst criticism imaginable for a building to be considered solely a work of art.

This was the first hurdle for Julian, and it helped to know how much of himself Robert had put into the Domome and how hard it had been for him to see it fail. Judging by his reaction to the photograph, he was still attached to it.

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"It's a beautiful building. It deserves to be seen. To be shown."

"I don't think so."

"Why? Because it has a flaw? Because it doesn't function the way you meant it to? There're plenty of buildings that don't, or that did but don't anymore. Stonehenge. The Parthenon. The Catacombs. They've all outlived their usefulness, but only if you define usefulness in one narrow and rigid way. And who does? No one. It's insulting to these works. They have so much to offer beside what they were built for. They're windows into a time and place. Into art and politics and technology. They represent themselves, but they also represent a world view."

"You've been doing some reading, Julian."

"The Domome used to be a building, now it's that and also a comment on buildings. It's historically and culturally and aesthetically interesting. It doesn't have to house people, any more than the Baths of Caracalla have to give people baths."

"I'd hardly put it on a par with the Baths of Caracalla. Or any of those monuments. With all due respect to your sudden erudition."

"But wouldn't you like to try your hand?"

"At what? Building a monument to myself?"

"To an idea, Robert. A phenomenon. A vision. Of tomorrow."

"So you think we should rechristen Fairchild's Folly. Is that what you're suggesting? Along the lines of what? Fairchild's Future? Fairchild's Favor to Humanity? His Forward-Thinking? The Feather in his Cap? Or maybe we should be more honest and not try to rewrite history. Stick with Fairchild's Fumble. His Failure. Fairchild's Flop."

"Forget the Domome. I'm talking about something else. Something different. A new way of looking. A new perception. If you don't want to call it a museum or a monument, fine. Don't. Call it whatever you like. Or don't call it anything. Call it an opportunity. A dream. A chance."

"As in second chance."

"As in chance of a lifetime."

It wasn't quite that, Robert told himself. But it wasn't nothing.

"All right. Tell me what you have in mind."

"I'm not an architect."

"But you have an idea."

Julian shrugged. "Something special."

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Robert waited for a bit more detail. Julian, however, appeared to believe that he had done his part.

"Something special," Robert said.

"Yes."

"And?"

"What?"

"Special and...what else?"

Julian thought for a moment. "Distinctive."

"Distinctive."

"Yes. And original."

"Of course."

"Different from everything else."

"You want something different."

"Yes."

"Unusual."

"Yes. That's right."

"Unique? Would you go that far?"

"Yes. Exactly. I would. Something unique."

Robert nodded and stroked his chin. So far he had learned next to nothing. He might as well have been talking to a stump.

"That's very helpful. Very useful. Thank you. You said big. How big?"

"Up to you."

He sincerely doubted this. "What's the budget? Who's in charge? Where's the money coming from? Public? Private? Both?"

"Private," said Julian. "Although I expect tax incentives." He gave Robert some rough numbers. "We have a group of investors. Fiduciary decisions rest with them. Artistic ones with you."

"Why do they want a museum? These investors. Apart, I know, from how vital it is to preserve and showcase my fiasco. What's in it for them?"

"They're very wealthy people. They want to spread some of that wealth. Give back to the community."

"Tax write-offs."

"Sure."

"Land swaps?"

Julian shrugged. "I'm not at liberty."

"Do you have a site?"

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This was arguably the most important detail of all, and Julian was uncharacteristically coy. "I think you're going to like it."

"Where is it?"

"If you could choose a place — anyplace...any city, any site — where would it be?"

Robert felt a flutter in his chest.

Julian stuffed his hands in his pockets and casually strolled to the window.

"If you're talking about what I think you're talking about, you can't see it," said Robert. "Not anymore."

"Too bad."

"I don't know. I got tired of staring at it. It was a tease."

"You can't have everything, I guess. Not every time."

"Unfortunately, it's not available."

Julian turned to face him. "No? What makes you say that?"

"I've checked. Believe me."

"Interesting. When I checked, it was." He paused, theatrically. "We've made an offer. I expect a counter-offer any day."

Robert was stunned. An inner voice warned him not to get his hopes up. The list of obstacles to such a project was long.

"The city...," he began, starting with the first and foremost, but Julian cut him off.

"Is behind us. More museums, more tourists. More privately funded museums, less drain on the public coffers. More privately funded museums designed by a world-renowned, native son...what could be better? You'll be a hero. Civic pride is going to pop."

Robert was not quite convinced. "I know who owns that piece of land. They haven't wanted to sell it for fifty years. What makes you think they'll sell it now?"

"Robert. Let me ask you something, and I mean no disrespect. Are you a businessman?"

"I try to be."

"Of course. But on a scale of one to ten, what would you say? One being someone who loves to wheel and deal, ten being someone who loves to doodle and dream and do just about anything else."

"I don't see myself as a number."

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"Exactly. The people I'm working with, they don't have money by accident. If they want the deal to happen, chances are it will. You can tell me all the reasons that it won't, but why bother? It's yours if you want it, Robert. It's been yours ever since I've known you."

The words hung in the air, and after a while Robert joined Julian at the window. The building that blocked the view was tall and sleek and rectangular, like a trailer stood on end. It was far from the worst of the new buildings. It wasn't ugly, just boring. It brought nothing to the skyline but another box.

"Want to take a drive?" asked Julian.

Robert didn't need a drive. He could see the site as clear as day. And the building he would build, he could see that too. It formed itself in his mind just as it had the day Grace inspired it.

"Sure," he said. "Let's."

HOW AND WHERE he found the time for it, with all his other work, he never knew, but he did, squeezing, coaxing, milking, wheedling, teasing every second. When he finally came up for air, three months had passed. He couldn't remember the last time he and Grace had spent an evening — or even much more than an hour — together. They made a date, but at the last minute, when Robert No. 2, who of late was sporting a beret and calling himself *Róbert*, an affectation calculated, it seemed, to annoy his progenitor (which it did), fell ill, she had to cancel. This led to a quarrel the following morning, Robert accusing No. 2 of obstruction and manipulation. Not to his face but to Grace, who found herself in the strange and challenging position of defending a man against himself.

"He was sick," she said.

"Conveniently," observed Robert.

"I don't know why you say that. He had a rash. You get rashes."

"Yes. And I take care of them myself. And they go away."

"He had welts all over his body."

"On his face?"

"Yes."

Robert conceded that welts on the face were no picnic. "He should have come to me."

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"Why would he do that?"

"I have medicine."

"That's not what I meant. I meant why would he come to you when it's clear you don't like him? What would be the point?"

"I like him. I made him."

"You don't like No. 3 either."

"No. 3's scared of me."

"Not really. He just prefers to be around people who are nice to him."

Three, thought Robert, was a poster boy for nice. "So then how come he likes to be around No. 2?

"*Róbert*'s nice to him. The two of them are friends. Good friends."

"I can't imagine what he sees in him."

She gave him a look. "You're joking."

"I'm not."

"Then I'd say the same thing you see in yourself."

"Now that's a scary thought."

She suffered this with the thinnest of smiles, remaining silent until his attempt at humor all but hung itself. They were not, Robert felt, off to the very best of starts.

He tried a different approach. "Are they nice to you?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Because I care. Because that's what they're for."

"Yes. They are. Always."

"You don't ever feel left out?"

"Why would I feel that?"

"I don't know. Two of them, one of you?"

She shrugged.

"You do," he said.

"It's not like that. The three of us, we're a family. We come together. We go our separate ways. We interact." This seemed the spice of life to her, its very essence, and when he didn't respond, when he just stood and looked at her, she had a sudden, jolt-like thought. "Maybe it's you who feels left out."

The image of 2's face, swollen with welts, rose up in Robert's mind, vivid and visceral, and he wondered if Grace had touched him with her soft

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and tender hands, touched him and healed him, and his stomach clenched, for he knew she had.

"I did last night," he said softly. "Not that I had any right."

"I'm sorry," she said. And she was. "Maybe there should be two of me."

This drew a smile. "It's good to see you, Grace."

"It's good to see you."

They were in the living room, facing each other, and now it became clear how desperate they were to connect. But they were shy, like young lovers, each afraid to make the wrong move. Robert felt he'd somehow failed Grace. To Grace the only failure would have been not to do what both of them so plainly wanted.

The boys were downstairs and occupied. There was really no reason for restraint. Grace was the first to take action. She held out her hand. Robert hesitated, not from reluctance to take it but from relief, and from wanting to savor the moment, the full meaning and impact of reconciliation and love. When at last he slid his palm into hers, he felt a shiver down his spine. They embraced, and shortly thereafter retired to the bedroom.

To Robert it seemed like a lifetime since they'd made love. Grace was unquestionably the most beautiful, responsive woman he'd ever known. He was instantly aroused and began to kiss her, beginning at her face and moving slowly and meticulously downward, as though to possess her, inch by intoxicating inch. Her neck, her shoulders, her breasts, her belly...her skin impossibly soft and warm and sensual. She spread her legs to him, and he slipped his head between them, ever so gently caressing her tender parts with his tongue and lips. She quivered, then started to heave, and he pulled back, quivering a little himself, feverish now, aching to enter her. As he proposed to do just that, he noted a mark on one of her thighs. Somehow he had missed it earlier. It appeared to be a bruise, but it didn't seem to hurt her. In fact, she didn't even know it was there, until he pointed it out. In retrospect, this was a mistake, for if he hadn't, he could have made up his own story as to how it appeared. She could have bumped herself. Strained and popped a blood vessel. But once mentioned, it could no longer be ignored.

"It's a hickey," said Grace, craning her neck to see it. "I guess."

"You guess."

"Seems like one."

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"From whom?"

"Robert," she said.

"Me? I don't remember."

Silently, she swore. It got so confusing sometimes: even though they acted differently, when all was said and done, the three of them were extremely alike. Especially Robert and Robert's Robert, the Robert he had given her. "I mean Robert No. 1. I mean 2. *Róbert.*"

The blood drained from Robert's face. "You two have been having sex?"

Grace was still aroused, and given the choice between fulfillment and frustration, she much preferred the former. "Can we maybe talk about this later?"

He looked at her, confused and hurt, and it was clear there was no possibility of deferring the discussion. As his penis shriveled, at a rate only slightly less than it had grown (what a marvel, thought Grace, and what a pity to say good-bye), she sat up. In response to the cold look in his eyes, she covered herself with a sheet. She didn't quite understand the fuss.

"Isn't that why you gave him to me? Isn't that what you wanted?"

"I wanted you to have someone to talk to. To do things with when I wasn't around."

"This is a thing."

"It's not the sort of thing I had in mind."

"But you made him. He's just like you. He is you, Robert. If you like it, why wouldn't he?"

"*He* is not the point."

"No? Then what is?"

"You are. I am."

She drew a breath and slowly let it out. "Okay. That's nice. You're right. I can deal with that." She held out her arms to him, as though the healing could now commence.

But no.

"How was it?" he asked dully.

Several exceedingly unpleasant seconds elapsed.

"Was it good? Did he say he loved you? What did you reply, Grace? Did you pant? Did you moan? Did you purr?"

"Stop."

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"I'm trying to understand."

"You're not."

"Understand and empathize. Experience it from your point of view. Because strange to say, I think I already know his."

"You act as if I betrayed you. But I was only being myself. And you're the one who made me. I was only being who you made."

"Well then maybe I should have made somebody else."

It was a terrible thing to say, but Grace refused to be blamed. "Don't say that. It makes me think you don't love me."

"I adore you," he said miserably, and he knew right then, as well as he knew anything, that Robert No. 2 had said the same. And he knew how he had touched her, and kissed her, and fucked her. And he knew how she had fucked him. And the look on her face afterwards, the softness, the flush, the radiance, he knew that too, and how she had floated around the house, disturbing nothing, as if in a dream.

"Don't be jealous, Robert. When I'm with him, it just reminds me what a good man you are. It makes me love you more than ever." Suddenly, there were tears in her eyes. "As if I could."

Dear God, thought Robert, what had he wrought? He was helpless before her. As his soft little mushroom began to stir, he realized it was pointless to be jealous. If he wanted Grace to himself, he had to make himself available. Either that or get rid of the competition. Would it be called murder or suicide, he wondered, if one killed one's duplicate? Or perhaps, he thought, brightening, it would simply be seen as a very late — and eminently reasonable — abortion.

As much as he possibly could, Robert steered clear of his rival, and when he couldn't, when they passed on the stairs or in a hall, he ignored him. As a strategy for improved relations, this was not well-conceived. Eventually, he realized its futility and, swallowing his pride, he went to No. 2 to talk things out.

Two received him coolly. He'd been ill-treated; no one, least of all a Robert, liked to be ignored. He did, however, understand the reasons. He knew about jealousy and possessiveness and how they fed on each other and grew until they drove out all else, turning a man into a slave, thwarting love and kindness, poisoning the mind and heart. They were a

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sign, he believed, of insecurity, a lack, not a surfeit, of love. He suggested, somewhat cryptically, that Robert expand his thinking, look beyond Grace and learn to love himself more. With that he excused himself, leaving much unanswered and unsaid.

It was a troubling conversation, which Robert tried to parse in the days that followed. Two had made no concessions. Notably, he had not agreed to stop seeing Grace. Rather, he had put the burden on Robert, who, it must be said, did not bear it well. He remained jealous, though to his credit he tried to keep it to himself. He was about as successful as most jealous men were, and Grace had the fortune of being the principal beneficiary of his triumph.

She was in the kitchen one evening, sifting through their latest argument, when Robert No. 3 entered the room. The two of them often made dinner together. It was something they shared, the pleasure of giving pleasure, in this case, the pleasure of preparing and serving food.

Tonight she was making a chicken and vegetable casserole, and No.3 grabbed a paring knife and joined in. He asked about her day, and eventually the conversation turned to their living situation. The Robert Wars, as 3 liked to call them. He wondered what, if anything, Grace was going to do.

"I know you've talked to them," he said.

"Till I'm blue."

"Any progress?"

She sighed. "What's that?"

"Have you thought of moving out?"

"Why would I do that?"

"To take a break. Get away."

"I don't want to move."

"Of course not. But look how miserable you are."

She was. "It shows?"

"Like a news report."

"They're acting like children."

"Like brats."

"Like apes."

No. 3 smiled. "Maybe if they would just beat their chests and bellow. Get it over with."

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"They do."

"Brutes," he said, sounding faintly amused.

"If they would only do it outside. Then at least I wouldn't have to watch. Now *that* would be progress."

"Like I said, a little separation...."

He was dicing a carrot, each cut measured and precise. Fussy almost. Like Robert, Grace thought, with his cut-up cardboard project models, built to perfection. Like and unlike.

"You do trigger them," he said.

"Do I?"

"Well I know I don't."

"They trigger themselves."

"Bang bang."

"They do."

"Men in close quarters. What can you do? It's either love or hate."

Some hair had come loose and fallen into her face, and she pushed it back, tucking it behind an ear. Almost immediately it worked its way free, and again she pushed it back, and then again, as though soothed by — indeed, as if dependent on — the repetition.

"What was it like before?" No. 3 asked.

"Before? What do you mean?"

"Before we arrived. What was it like then?"

"That was ages ago."

"Were you happy?"

"Sure."

"Lonely?"

She thought about it. "It's hard to remember."

She wasn't being evasive. For No. 3 too, and also for *Róbert*, the past was often vague and difficult to recall. In real time the three of them had only been alive a short while; in a sense, they were infants. New experiences piled up and quickly overshadowed older ones. "Now" was sharp; "then" went in and out of focus. As if time itself was unstable and couldn't settle down.

"Maybe I was. Sometimes. A little. But I managed. It was okay. Things usually are."

"So you wouldn't mind if it was like that again?"

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"Like what?"

"Living with Robert."

"I do live with him." She glanced at 3. Something wasn't being said. "What's this about?" Tick tick tick, and then she got it. "*You're* the one who wants to move out."

"I want to do what's best for you."

"It's not."

"Then forgive me."

"Or for Robert."

"Are you sure?"

She wasn't. "Have you talked about this with No. 2?"

A smile flickered across his face at her use of that name. It was no mere slip of the tongue. He knew how her mind worked, being an echo of that mind. She was upset, and in response was establishing, or attempting to establish, her position in the pecking order, her place.

"*Róbert*," he said, gently correcting her, "agrees. Both of us want to do what's best for you. It is, after all, why we're here."

He stopped what he was doing and turned to her, his big brown eyes soft and round. "I worry that we're a burden on you, Grace. That we're taking up too much of you. Interfering somehow. Getting in the way."

"The way of what?"

"Your happiness. What else?"

The words were right, but something didn't ring true. She frowned, and No. 3 was quick to respond. "Now look what I've done. I've given you wrinkles."

He kissed his fingers and transferred the kiss to her forehead. In a solicitous voice he said, "You and Robert had another fight, didn't you?"

"We talked, if that's what you mean."

"Jealousy is such a blight."

"It's stupid."

Three sighed. "It is. And we are. Stupid. Men, I mean. We get jealous so easily. It seems to run in our blood. Jealousy and hurt and vindictiveness. I wish I'd been born a woman. Like you, Grace. I wish I'd been born like you."

She felt that he was making fun of her. "I'm sorry you're not happy with the job I did."

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"It never occurred to you to make me female?"

"Not once."

"I would have still been Robert. Or as close to him, or nearly as close, as I am now. And I do feel close to him. I truly do. I know how much it hurts him when he fights with you. And when he knows that you've been with *Róbert*. It's a terrible feeling when the one you love loves someone else."

"He gave me *Róbert*. It was his idea. And I don't love someone else. There is no someone else. I love Robert. I love all of you."

"So much love. It's your gift, Grace. A woman's gift."

She glared at him. "What makes you say that?"

"It's something I read. Men have a different muscle. It's why we worship you. Why we can't get enough. Why we have to run away."

"Is that what you want to do?"

"Not what I want. What I read."

"Not very nice."

"I agree. Personally, I have the utmost respect for women. I have the utmost respect for you, Grace." He returned to his dicing, then paused and gave her a peck on the cheek. "I'm sorry for what I said. I didn't mean it. You did a fabulous job with me. I wouldn't be here, and I certainly wouldn't be the man I am, if it wasn't for you."

"Or Robert."

"Both of you. I owe my life to you. And four...what can I say? Four is just a brilliant number."

It was another jab. "Four was unplanned."

"Planning's overrated. Sometimes it's best to leave things to chance. Just think if there'd been only three of us."

Just then *Róbert* entered the kitchen. No. 3 looked up instantly, a smile on his face, and it struck Grace how often this happened, that he looked up smiling, especially with *Róbert*. This time the smile was returned, and Grace felt the hairs on her neck stand up. They were looking at each other in just the way she looked at Robert when she was full of love for him. The way he sometimes looked at her.

"What's for dinner?" *Róbert* asked.

She and No. 3 started to reply simultaneously. Both halted, then Grace untied her apron and laid it on the counter. Three was wrong to think that men had the market on jealousy. She was amazed at herself, to

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feel such a thing. She hadn't thought herself capable. Then again, it wasn't so surprising, considering who had made her. Barring the stab of it, and the way it constricted her chest and filled her mind with the most wild, improbable, and terrible thoughts, it was a lot like love. She wanted to scratch somebody's eyes out.

"Vegetables," she told *Róbert*. "And chicken. Your favorite meal. Cooked by your favorite cook."

"Cooks," he said.

"Whatever."

She told No. 3 she'd think about what he'd said. She seemed to recall Robert's extolling the virtues of the triangle, explaining how it was the strongest, most reliable, sturdiest shape. Retreating upstairs, she pondered this, concluding that he would have thought differently — and in in all likelihood would never have made such a claim — had he been forced to build with humans.

MEANWHILE, ACROSS TOWN, Robert was supervising a crew of humans, who were earning his lasting respect for the incredibly difficult job they were doing. The shell of the museum, two hundred feet in diameter and three hundred and fifty feet tall, was in place, and into it the crew was lowering the Domome, all in one piece. There was a modest breeze, which sang through the taut cables of the five mammoth cranes and added a note of urgency to the procedure. Though nominally in charge, Robert was completely dependent on the skill of the crane operators, and he stood at a safe distance, watching anxiously. It would have been far easier for the house to have been disassembled, trucked in, and reassembled, but its Pakki-flex sheath might not have survived intact. Furthermore, there were no openings in the shell big enough for anything but the smallest section of the house to fit through. Robert had envisioned (and designed) an enclosure that, save for an entrance and an exit door, was one continuous and inviolate envelope, immutable as it were, in contrast to (and comment on) the house itself, whose Pakki-flex dome and walls mutated seemingly at will. It was cylindrical in shape and constructed of hundreds of panels of glass, each of which spanned the full height of the museum. They were staggered in front and behind one another and joined

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by a perpendicular glass weld, and each curved ever so slightly outward, so that the mouth of the cylinder gently spread as it rose, like a fountain. The glass was lightly frosted, denser in some parts than others, which gave it the appearance of dappled foam. It was thick and impenetrable, except of course to light. Or possibly a heavy object, such as a swinging building, which the crane operators were doing their utmost to control. The obvious alternative — to build the museum around the house — had been the subject of intense debate and ultimately opposed by the project's structural engineers, although now Robert wished he'd been more insistent. On the other hand, it was a remarkable thing to see, his house being slowly swallowed by the great maw of glass.

Finally it was down, or nearly down, hovering a foot or two above its elevated concrete pallet, previously poured, while the ground crew awaited Robert's instructions to position it. When that task was done, the front door of the house aligned with the museum's entrance door — giving what he hoped would be a diorama-like, keyhole effect — it was quitting time, and the workers fled, leaving Robert alone.

The sun was sinking, and its long light poured through the western curve of the museum, passing through the glass on the opposite wall but also reflecting off it. The upper reaches of the museum, already a buttery gold, blazed brighter, as if from a newfound source of light. From where he stood it seemed that the sun, in addition to setting, was rising. There could have been two or even three suns in the sky. Gradually, the light thickened, until the whole interior of the museum — now a deep, rich honey color — glowed. It was almost palpable. Robert, who had conceived, designed, and even, to a certain degree, foreseen these effects, had not foreseen how striking they would be. Nor how moved he would feel. It was as though he were immersed in radiance, bathed and baptized by a power, a benevolence, beyond what he knew. For an instant he felt a shift — a dilation — in consciousness. This creation of his was grounded in reality and at the same time suggested a higher reality, a greater, loftier one. The way a person could be at a particular time and place, a particular moment, in his life, and then, triggered by the least of things — a sound, a scent, a random thought — be somewhere else entirely. There were worlds upon worlds, worlds within worlds...wasn't this what architecture, at its best, hinted at?

He entered the Domome, which was shielded but not exempt from

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the light show overhead. He had the sense of being underwater. The light appeared to ripple as it fell across the floor. Shadows shifted, edges softened, doors and windows seemed to have double lives. He made a full transit of the house, beginning in the main wing, moving quickly through the living quarters and ending in the dome room. Like all the others, it was empty. The air was slightly stale, and as the sound of his footsteps died, he glanced at the dome, half-expecting it to respond to his presence, to quiver, shrink, pucker, collapse. But it was motionless, as graceful and flawless as the day it was created. There was no hint of its history, though in his own mind it was painfully clear. After the ill-fated dinner party, reported at excruciating length by a sensation-hungry, gleeful press, the humiliated owners had slapped him with a high profile and crippling lawsuit. Recalling that difficult time, he wondered for perhaps the hundredth time just how wise it was to refer to it intentionally, to make it, indeed, the centerpiece of this endeavor. Julian liked to say that success was built on failure, and in the lab, the marketplace of ideas, this, no doubt, was true. But in the marketplace of taste? Of art? Better perhaps, certainly more realistic, to view failure as a chance for success, an opportunity but no guarantee. People had to be ready. Things had to fall into place. Luck was involved.

Much, he believed, depended on the Domome itself, which presently, being uninhabited, was inert. They were interviewing prospective residents, and now that the house was in place, they could start to screen them actively. Only some would be able to trigger the Pakki-flex, and a far fewer would have the emotional makeup and temperament to be on more or less permanent display. Many sought attention without knowing the price of attention. Some became bloated with it, some nervous, some depressed and withdrawn. The optimal candidate had to be stable, and steady under pressure. Outgoing, communicable and enthusiastic. Intelligence, while not critical, was a definite plus.

So far the prospects were not good, and as he left the Domome and then the museum, he tried to imagine who would possibly welcome such a job. Julian had suggested he design someone for the purpose, but Robert, who had designed everything else, felt that would be extreme. Already the project bordered on the grandiose.

He reached his car as the sun was about to disappear. The museum

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shone like a ruby and seemed indeed to be emerging from the ground, just as he had first imagined it, a jewel in the process of extrusion, of birth, from Mother Earth. It seemed made of man and nature both, of man's nature, his best and truest aspirations; and Robert felt a chill. He had achieved something here. There was no denying it. Something of note. Would it stand the test of time? That was out of his hands. But at this moment — this hour, this day — it stood a more important and stringent test: his own. He felt an odd mixture of humility and elation, and he wanted to share it with someone, and that someone was Grace.

But Grace in all likelihood was home. And he didn't want to go home. With the veiled affronts he was certain to encounter there, the cloak and dagger looks, the various and sundry assaults on his equanimity and peace of mind, home was the last place he wanted to go.

For the second time in as many weeks he became conscious of his missing eye. No. 2, who liked to hover just past the edge of his vision on that side, as if to emphasize his disability, had made a joke about it. Something clever and seemingly harmless, such that even Grace had smiled. He didn't like No. 2. He hadn't from the start. He found him self-serving, aggressive, egotistical and pompous. When he thought of 2, he thought of something low to the ground. When he looked at him, he saw a lesser man.

On the face of things this was absurd. Except for the eye, the two of them were the same, in every conceivable way. He had told Grace, before being cuckolded, that he felt awkward around 2, uneasy, that he didn't feel himself. This was true enough (and more now than ever), but the deeper truth was that he felt himself in the extreme, himself magnified, caricatured, stripped and exposed.

He got in his car and drove around aimlessly, ending up, as he so often did these days, at his office. He called Grace, who didn't pick up, and was left with a recording of her cheerful, fluted voice, which under the circumstances sounded derisive and mocking. He read through the applications of a dozen new candidates, a grueling and arid experience, then got out his blanket and pillow. The futon stared at him like the cold eye of a fish on ice. Daybreak was a lifetime away. The night promised to be a long one.

* * *

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Some weeks later, he and Grace went for a drive. Things simply could not go on the way they were. It was early autumn, sunshiny and cool, and they left the city in the afternoon for a nearby woods, what remained of a much larger forest. Conversation was limited to small talk, wedged like a struggling alpine plant between blocks of silence. Robert was so full of things to say, so full of feelings, he didn't know where or how to begin. Excitement at the museum's imminent completion, anticipation as to how it would be received, nervousness, confidence, uncertainty, pride...these and more occupied his mind, and along with them, shading, infiltrating, underscoring everything, were his feelings for Grace. And what, at this troubled point, he could only hope were hers for him. More intricate and complex than any piece of architecture, any building.

As for Grace, she was determined to enjoy herself, which at the moment meant thinking as little as possible. The small and great things she had on her mind, the trivial and the consequential, could wait. She had a desire, if not a need, for more immediate and tangible pleasures.

She rolled the window down and let the wind fill her face. It was a joy to be on the road. She loved the city, but it had begun to oppress her, particularly her small corner of it, bounded by the walls of her home and the men within those walls. She had been designed to love, and love she did, but this didn't stop her from having other feelings, and at present, flawed creature that she was, she was feeling over-Roberted.

So what, she had to ask, was she doing in the car? It was a question that even the most obdurately thought-averse of women might profitably consider. Was there something she was trying to prove? To prevent? To save? As a matter of habit, she did not put a great deal of store in the hidden mind, but lately she'd been having dreams — scary, exhilarating dreams — of flight.

They drove north then west, past the suburbs and the cow and horse farms, up and over one ridge then another, into a valley at the base of a small mountain, thick with pines, madrones and oaks and cut by a lazy stream. The air was dry but pungent. A gentle breeze stirred the tops of the trees.

They left the car at the head of a dirt path and started off on foot. The silence they had commandeered while driving still possessed them, although now, in the bosom of Nature and Her lively arboreal choir, it was

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less fraught. They walked abreast, at times brushing shoulders, until at length Robert took Grace's hand. The trail steepened, and they came to a downed tree, where they stopped to catch their breaths.

The section of the tree that had blocked the trail had been sawed out and removed, while the remainder had been left where it had fallen. On the downhill side the long, hefty trunk lay on the slope as straight as a pipe, looking much the same as it must have when it stood, save for the gentlest of undulations at its fracture points. Its bark looked like the bark on living trees, as bark resisted change, unlike the wood beneath it, which was slowly melting into the ground. On the uphill side, looming above them, sat the root ball, a tangled mass of feeder and anchor roots bridged by clods of dirt, now covered with a blush of moss and overrun with vines and creepers. It had been a year or two since the tree had fallen. One home — to jays, squirrels, hawks and other high-dwelling creatures — had been lost, but a new one — to towhees, sparrows and mice — had been created. This was the world of the forest.

In the world of construction, there was also loss. Of the old, or, in the case of building from scratch, on undisturbed land, the loss of nature. How one responded to that loss could define a career. One could no longer despise and bully nature and seek to bury her, at least not overtly. Having been tamed, she could now be duly praised, promoted, and loved. But love came in different flavors and styles, and sometimes it came in a form that seemed distorted, the very opposite of what it purported to be. There were architects who spoke of warmth and harmony and built abominations. Others were more honest. For the museum Robert had sought to do justice to a great many things: the city, the materials, the environment, the times, and above all, his belief that human beings were put on Earth to delight and inspire one another. The dance of light through glass, the upswooping cathedral-like enclosure, the exterior reflection of other buildings, and of the water and the sky...all were meant to convey, if not deliver, this message. Life, however carefully planned, was full of surprises. This was another of his beliefs, a corollary of the first, and throughout the design process he had strived to give it voice, guided by intuition and love of his craft and of his city and of nature, and also love of human beings, and of one in particular, and he longed to know what she thought.

"Have you seen it?" he asked, breaking their long silence.

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Grace had no need to ask what he meant. "Yes. Of course. I can see it from the bedroom window."

"But lately. Have you seen it lately?"

"Yes. I look at it every day."

"Up close? Have you seen it up close?"

"That too," she said, smiling. "I also use binoculars."

He'd seen the binoculars and had wondered what they were for. Now, like a supplicant, he waited, not only for her opinion but also, and perhaps more importantly, her praise.

"It's beautiful. It's the finest thing you've ever done."

"Yes?"

"Yes. I love it."

He could scarcely contain his happiness. "That's good. That's very good." He looked away from her, fighting back emotion, then back. "Thank you."

"Why? You're the one who designed it. Thank yourself."

"You inspired it. I couldn't have done it without you."

She was surprised, particularly considering how things had been of late. "Have you decided who's going to live in it?"

"No. Not yet."

She had some thoughts on the matter, but for the moment kept them to herself. Instead, she returned to the museum, which was vivid in her mind. The way it seemed to explode from the ground, like a vent of steam, thrusting itself upward...it seemed so male to her, so attention-grabbing, so Robertesque, and while it thrilled her to look at it, she wondered what role she could possibly have played in its conception.

"How did I inspire it? What about me?"

"Everything."

"For example."

"All of you. Every bit. Top to bottom, inside out." He paused, conscious of how lame he sounded. "It's hard to put into words."

But words were what she wanted, specific and concrete, as though the deed itself were not enough. She waited, while Robert struggled to untie his tongue.

Eventually he said, "I built it for you."

"For me?" This seemed unlikely.

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"For both of us. But you were always there, at the back of my mind. I wanted you to like it. I always want you to like what I do."

She had a curious reaction to this. At first she thought him rather pathetic, child-like without the virtue of being a child. But then she remembered who she was.

"I miss you, Robert."

"I miss you, too."

"Come home. Come be with me again."

"I can't. I'm not strong enough. Or uninhibited enough. Or something."

"I've stopped sleeping with him."

He stiffened. It wasn't the sex, not in and of itself. It was the sex plus everything else.

"He must be lonely." The thought gave him a certain amount of pleasure, though less than he would have guessed. Less, it seemed, than it should.

Grace considered how to proceed. In point of fact, she hadn't really stopped, not in the strict sense of the word, the absolute, unequivocal, lock the door and throw away the key sense, not in *that* sense, but she had stopped for now. *Róbert* (or R Prime, his current nom de guerre) didn't like it, but that was *Róbert*: like all the Roberts, he preferred things his way. And who knew the future? It was prudent, she felt, to keep an open mind.

"I wouldn't worry about it," she replied.

"Do you love him, Grace?"

The question shocked her. "I love you."

He wanted to believe her. She could read it all over his face. And the uncertainty, and the wariness, she could read that too.

"Tell me something, Robert. When you made me, you made me so I wouldn't be hurt by you. So I couldn't be. But it hurts to see you suffer. It hurts to see you sad. Why didn't you make me immune to that, too?"

He had no answer, except that he had done his best. Perhaps some hurts were inherent to being human.

Grace considered this. It seemed plausible. On the other hand, wasn't it equally inherent to being human that humans — including the makers of humans — would aspire to more?

"Maybe next time," she said.

He glanced at her sharply.

She was teasing.

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He was not amused. "There won't be a next time. I promise you."

"Which means what, Robert? You're happy with what you've got? You're giving up? Slinking away?"

"I'm happy."

"You don't look happy."

"Give me a minute."

It took less. And she didn't really see his face because she was in his arms. But she felt it, the happiness. And she had a revelation: some hurts just had to be fixed after the fact. They brought out the best in people, and that's why they existed. As reminders, as opportunities, to do good. To come together. To mend differences. To love.

— 4 —

THE OPENING of the museum, scheduled for late October, was delayed by more than a month. It was rare that any building was ever completed on time — it seemed against some natural law — although in this case the structure itself (and everything connected to it: exhibits and displays, security, landscaping, parking) was finished well in advance. Staff had been hired, uniforms created (using a fully tested, nonreactive Pakki-flex congener spun into a "skin on skin" fabric, producing a wonderful, shimmering, moiré effect), but at the last minute, at the architect's insistence, who himself was following the sage, if not brilliant, advice of his most beloved, there was a change. The couple who had been selected to inhabit the Domome was asked to step down in favor of another couple, who, nepotism aside, was really the perfect choice. It was several weeks before the house responded, and the new occupants were deemed acceptable. This was not wholly unexpected, but, all things considered, it was a huge relief.

October in the city was a time of cloud-studded skies, mild temperatures and gorgeous, golden light. By contrast, December was the season of rain, and the day of the opening dawned drizzly and gray. As he stood at his bedroom window, dressing and rehearsing the few words he would say, unable to see through the heavy curtain of sprinkle and mist, Robert worried that the museum would not show itself to advantage on such a dreary day.

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He worried about the Domome too, which after all was just a house. What made it different, elevated it (if that was the word), was the Pakki-flex, and Pakki-flex was fickle: perhaps this would be the day that it did nothing, that it chose to take a rest. And if it did, could the house alone justify itself as the centerpiece of such a hullabaloo? Nothing like this had ever been done before, not on this scale. And for good reason, he thought.

He was no stranger to ribbon-cuttings, nor to the pressures and anxieties attending them, which typically he shouldered alone. Today, however, he had an ally, and at a sound he turned from the window, and there she was. Her hair was up; she wore a new dress. His worries and apprehensions didn't stand a chance, scattering like autumn leaves at the sight of her.

"God, you're beautiful."

She smiled, lifting her chin.

"You make me weak."

"Weak?"

"In the knees."

"It's a big day," she said.

They stood there, drinking each other in, all else — the bigness of the day, the weather, the time — forgotten. He crossed the room and laid his hand on her shoulder, which was bare, and gently traced the contour of her neck as it curved ever so gracefully upward toward her face. To Grace the touch was like an electric current. She felt it to the tip of her toes.

They exchanged a glance.

"No?" he asked.

She was half a second slow in responding.

"I can deal with no."

"Yes," she said.

"Yes meaning what? No?"

"No," she said, draping her arms around his neck and pulling him close. "Yes meaning yes."

Fifteen minutes later, after dressing again and straightening up, they hurried out the door. They were just in time for the festivities, arriving as the mayor was stepping to the microphone. Flanking him were the directors of the city's departments of planning, preservation and the arts, various underlings, several leading architects, and Julian with two of his partners.

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The media, along with a moderate crowd, were also there. Considering everyone who wanted a share of the credit, the ceremony was mercifully brief. Near the end of the speeches the rain slowed, then stopped altogether, and the sky began to lift. At the moment the ribbon was cut, the sun put in an appearance, and as the crowd surged forward, it struck the museum with a broad swath of light. The glass seemed to catch fire, which spread from panel to panel and then shot upward, until the museum was wreathed in pale, shimmering, amber light. A gasp went up from the crowd. A few of them glanced at Robert.

And the Domome...what more could he have asked or hoped for? As the galleries and balconies filled, and the sun played peek-a-boo, creating one felicity after another with the museum's walls, the dome, as if on cue, began to pucker, as though the air beneath it were liquefying and being brought to a boil. As the pucker grew, a hush came over the crowd, every eye fixed on the steadily enlarging bubble. When it covered most of the dome and seemed on the very brink of bursting, a rent appeared in it, narrow at first, slit-sized, like a long paper cut. Wrinkles appeared on the surface of the bubble, which, remarkably, retained its shape and did not deflate. There was a collective intake of air, oohs and aahs, followed by sustained applause.

As if in response, the rent widened, revealing first one man, then another, beneath the dome in the room below. Both, in formal wear, were looking up, taking in the sea of faces trained on them, and if one seemed more pleased with the attention, more in love with it, it didn't show. They had their arms around each other, and high above them, Robert slipped his around Grace. He was as happy as he'd ever been. He had his masterpiece. He had Grace. In the world there was nothing he wanted more.

For Grace it was hardly different. She had everything she wanted: her man, her man's happiness, his love. She also had the museum's key. Robert had left a copy of it in plain view on a table at home, and after several days, assuming it was there for a reason, she took it. Nothing was ever said.

The applause grew louder, and it was joined by whistles and cheers. And now the two men were smiling, and now they were waving. And Grace, having threaded her arm around Robert, gave him a loving squeeze, and with her other hand, her free one, she waved back. ☙

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PLUMAGE FROM PEGASUS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Galley Knaves

"How do you get your author's ARC to stand out in a stack? Make it look like something other than a book, for starters. This is the tack St. Martin's Minotaur imprint has taken with Chelsea Cain's forthcoming serial killer mystery, *Heartsick*. Four thousand galleys, stuffed in clear 'evidence' packets, were mailed to booksellers and the press last week, making the September novel look as if it was culled from the scene of a crime. (Adding to that aesthetic is the title's plain white cover splashed with red blotches made to look like bloodstained fingerprints.)"

—"Minotaur Gets Inventive with New ARC," Rachel Deahl, *PW Daily*, 4/11/2007.

THE doorbell rang just as I was finishing a review for *The Washington Post Book World*: Soho Crane's new serial killer mystery, *Liverfluke*. (The novel had been holding my interest right up until the climax, when the killer was revealed to be an extraterrestrial intelligent parasitic worm. I really can't stand science fiction, even when hybridized with the mystery genre.)

I suspected that the bell signaled the arrival of the postal delivery person. The hour was just about right. Most days, the postal person just quietly filled the giant lidded plastic tub on my porch with that day's shipment of packages, then left. But if a signature was needed, or the bin overflowed with book-stuffed padded envelopes and boxes exposed to inclement weather, I'd get buzzed.

I left my study and headed to the front of the house.

I unlocked the door and looked out.

A bloody corpse sprawled akimbo across my door mat!

Despite being a hardened reader of thrillers, I'm not ashamed to confess that I let out a guttural cry of horror!

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Perhaps if I lived in a rough neighborhood, I would have been inured to such sights. But steady employment as a full-time mystery book reviewer had allowed me to buy a large splendid house in an exclusive district of my town. (And if you believe that, then I've got a plagiarized undergraduate novel to sell you!) Actually, although the street where I rented my apartment ran along the border of a questionable precinct, it was generally respectable and crime-free.

That's why I was so surprised at this ghoulish intrusion.

I was frantically digging my cell out of my pants pocket to call 911, when I looked up and spotted the U.S. Mail truck, parked a few feet away. Next to it stood my regular delivery person, grinning broadly.

"I had to ride around all morning with that damn stiff in my truck. Thought you should get some of the same excitement."

Then he climbed behind the wheel and motored off.

With calmer eyes and slowing heartrate, I regarded the "corpse."

It proved to be a cheap-looking, flexible, life-sized mannequin, with painted-on clothing. A postage-meter strip was pasted to its forehead, and the address label was attached in the form of a HELLO MY NAME IS label on its chest.

I lugged the lightweight mannequin inside.

I noted then a dotted line across its stomach that proclaimed SLICE OPEN HERE.

A kitchen knife secured access to the dummy's cavity.

Inside was an ARC, and publicity materials.

"Kentucky Canebrake's new crime opus, *The Corpse Always Rings Twice*, hits with all the impact of a drive-by shooting on your doorstep...."

My initial fear and disgust at this stunt began to fade, to be replaced with grudging admiration for the publicist's ingenuity. There was no way I'd soon forget the arrival and existence of this particular book. Of course, any review of mine would still have to focus objectively on the book's innate qualities....

I added *The Corpse Always Rings Twice* to the top of my queue of possible review candidates.

But now I was faced with disposal of the "packaging." It would never fit intact into my trash bin, and would certainly look quite startling sticking out.

So, feeling like a real criminal, I chopped the mannequin up into

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pieces, bagged them, and dumped them outside.

Little did I anticipate that this was just the start of a flood of "different" ARCS.

Other publishers eventually noticed that Kentucky Canebrake's latest book seemed to garner a larger-than-expected number of reviews, and determined to secure the attention of reviewers with similarly outrageous packages.

Over the next several months, among dozens of macabre galleys, I received prepublication mysteries disguised as a dead sheep atop a hay bale (*The Silage of the Lambs*); a raw side of beef (*Until the Cows Come Home*); an arson-ruined dollhouse (*MacMansion Murders*); a sackful of plastic severed wimpled heads (*Two Heads are Deader than Nun*); and an actual tombstone weighing several hundred pounds accompanied by a real coffin (empty except for the ARC, thank God; this last presentation was for a sequel-by-other-hands to Chester Himes's series about Coffin Ed Johnson and Grave Digger Jones, wherein the two funky detectives had to solve a prep-school murder: *Groton Comes to Harlem*).

Some of the books receiving this elaborate treatment were good, others not so. But that was hardly the issue any longer. The issue was the headaches involved for me in unwrapping and disassembling these packages. More and more of my week began to be filled with tedious removal of books from elaborate housings, and then bundling up the waste for disposal. (And I paid a per-bag municipal trash fee!)

But how could I avoid this onerous new duty? My whole livelihood was reviewing, and I couldn't very well ask to be removed from the list for free books....

Inspiration for a possible solution struck in the oddest manner.

One day I had just stepped outside to retrieve my mail when an object sailed through the air and hit me in the head. Luckily, it was a soft thing and caused no harm.

I picked up the object: it was a mock brick fashioned of Nerf foam with a note attached. The note said, "Get ready to receive your copy of George Pelacanos's brutal noir retelling of O. Henry's *The Ransom of Red Chief*...."

My postal person was stifling his laughter from across the street. "They paid the Post Office five cents extra per unit to throw it at the customer!"

I shook my fist at him. "No Xmas gift for you this year!"

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But I should have thanked him, because the mild blow to my head had dislodged an idea.

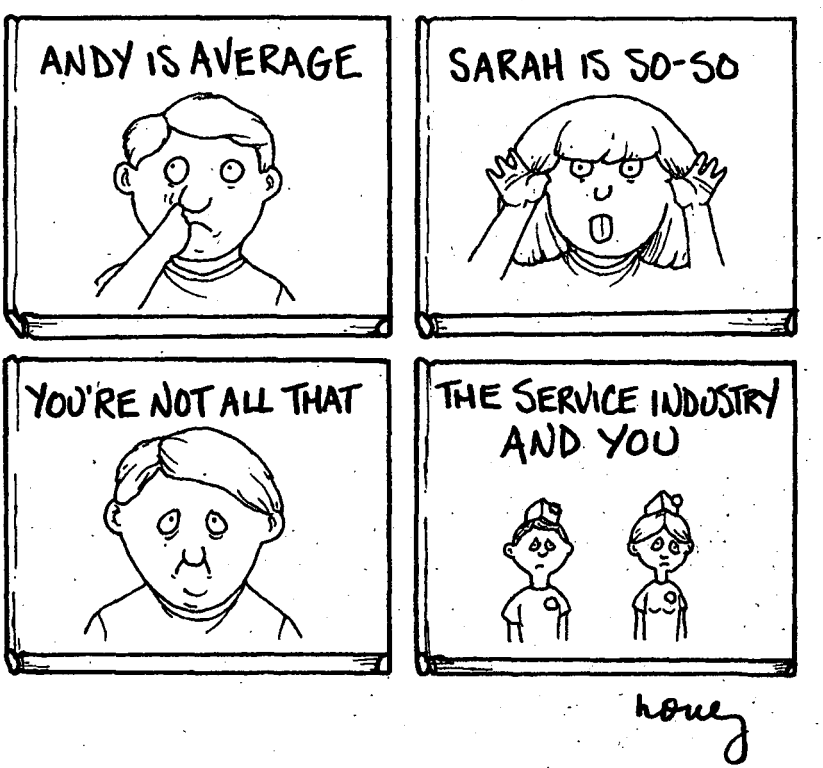
I always submit tearsheets of my reviews to the publishers. A simple Xeroxed page in a business-sized envelope.

But not anymore.

I'd see how the publicists liked receiving, for instance, a bad review stuffed inside a wheel of smelly cheese or wrapped around some fish, and a good one accompanied by a bottle of cheap perfume with the stopper left slightly awry in transit.

And if these mild tactics failed, I could always pull one, possibly two, van Goghs.

SPECULATIONS IN A WORLD OF DIMMING PROSPECTS, CHILDREN'S BOOKS WILL CHANGE TACK AND TRY TO REIN IN RUNAWAY SELF-ESTEEM.



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Scott Dalrymple is Associate Professor and Chair of the Business Administration & Accounting Department at Hartwick College in upstate New York (but he says "Business Administration professor" will do). He recently coauthored a book on management called Time Mastery. *This story, his first published work of fiction, is in no way inspired by either of his two wonderful sons (or so he assures us).*

Enfant Terrible

By Scott Dalrymple

"CAN I HELP YOU," STATES the school secretary, in the sort of tone you might use if a stranger suddenly began swimming in your backyard pool.

Struggling to seem cheerful, you give your name. "I'm from the University," you explain. When that does not suffice, you add, "Here to see Mrs. Lipsig? Fourth grade?"

The woman sneers. "No one told me."

"I'm sorry," you say, though you decide that you are not, really.

The woman consults a worn sheet of paper taped to her desk. "Mrs. Lipsig," she says. "Mrs. Lipsig." At first it seems she is talking to herself, but then you notice a tiny hands-free cord dangling from her ear. "Never answers the phone," she complains. "I'm not walking all the way down there. Fill this out."

She hands you a peel-and-stick nametag. "Are you a professor?" she asks, suddenly animated. "My daughter went there." When you say nothing, she adds, "For nursing." The courtesy seems rather tardy, so rather than answer, you just look at her blankly and ask, "Where do I go?"

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She tells you, clearly taken aback by such rudeness; the incident will no doubt be the stuff of staff lounge discussion.

Your shoes squeak on the waxed floor of the hallway, which is otherwise completely silent. A large banner on the wall proclaims, in anthropomorphized letters, YOU ARE SPECIAL TOO.

As you turn a corner, a remarkably tiny boy approaches. He meekly displays his hall pass as if expecting trouble. You give him a military salute, which he accepts without apparent surprise.

When you reach Mrs. Lipsig's room, you can hear a commotion through the closed door, next to which is a tall oblong window. You peer inside. Before you can focus on the scene, an octopus of purple goo slaps the inside of the glass, precisely at eye level.

A blonde girl comes to the window, stands on tiptoes, and peels it off. She sees but does not acknowledge you, instead running away and flinging the octopus toward the head of an unsuspecting boy, himself busy drawing on the chalkboard with crayons.

Mrs. Lipsig is not visible. You knock.

The octopus girl cracks the door and gazes out.

"Is Mrs. Lipsig here?" you ask.

In answer, the girl opens the door.

The classroom is modern, with a data projector suspended from the ceiling and computer stations lining two walls. You can smell the newness of the brown speckled carpet.

"Where is Mrs. Lipsig?"

The girl points to a short bookcase. Behind it is a woman of about sixty, flat on her back, surrounded by Lilliputians piling toys on top of her.

"You moved!" complains a girl whose block tower has collapsed on the woman's forehead.

"I'm sorry," says the woman.

You clear your throat. "Mrs. Lipsig?"

"Yes?" she asks, no embarrassment in her voice.

"I hope you're expecting me," you say. "From the University?"

She rises slowly. Toys cascade off her body as she does, initiating a chorus of protests.

"Oh," she says. "From the University?"

"I appreciate you letting me visit today."

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She smiles sweetly. "Okay, dear."

A buzzer sounds, so loud you can feel it in your teeth.

"Time for lunch!" shouts Mrs. Lipsig enthusiastically.

The children do not form an orderly line at the door; instead, they rush into the hall as if the room is on fire. When the last straggler leaves and the door clicks behind him, it feels as if you are suddenly wearing earplugs.

Mrs. Lipsig invites you to sit next to her desk.

"Do you mind if I eat?" she asks. "They'll be back soon."

You say you don't mind at all.

Mrs. Lipsig opens a paper bag and holds a sandwich up to the light.

"Do you mind if I eat?" she repeats. "They'll be back soon."

"Please," you assure her.

She takes a bite. "Boy, I like these," she says.

"Like what?" you ask.

"These," she says.

"Sandwiches?"

She nods. "Yes! Very good. Sandwiches." She says the word slowly, as if getting the feel of it.

You say you agree: sandwiches are very good indeed.

"This class after lunch," you ask, "these will be the gifted children?"

Mrs. Lipsig speaks as she chews. "Yes. Mrs. Rapp takes the others fifth period, and I do gifted."

"They can be difficult to handle," you observe. "Demanding."

Mrs. Lipsig appears not to hear you. "Where are you from, dear?"

"From the University."

"Oh. I went to university once."

You nod.

"What do you study?" she asks.

"I'm interested in exceptionally gifted children," you answer. "I understand that one of your students scores off the charts."

"Oh," she says absently.

In what seems an impossibly short time, the herd of fourth-graders blasts back into the room.

"Okay, group A to Mrs. Rapp's room," cries Mrs. Lipsig. "Group One stay here!" Most of the children trickle to an adjoining classroom. A few

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moments later, a young teacher enters, followed by a handful of additional students.

"Oh, hello," she says. "I'm Mrs. Rapp."

You introduce yourself.

"Are you a parent?" she asks.

You laugh. "No. I'm just here to observe."

"Mrs. Lipsig?" she asks skeptically.

"Yes."

As she walks away, she says, in a confidential tone, "Let me know if you need anything."

Mrs. Lipsig instructs the nine remaining students to move the desks so they can sit on the floor, in a circle.

"We have a special treat today," she says. "A visitor." She asks if you would like to lead the class in an exercise.

"Sure," you say. You look at each of the children in turn; it's not obvious. "Let's play a game. Do you know what a hypothetical situation is?" you ask.

A cute Asian girl raises her hand. "Where you make a hypotenuse?"

You chuckle, but Mrs. Lipsig does not. "You're thinking the right way," you say. "Does anybody know what a hypothesis is?"

A number of hands go up. You choose a boy with an alarming number of freckles. "It's what you think is true."

"That's right. A hypothetical situation is one that isn't necessarily true, but we imagine it's true just for now. Make sense?"

The children indicate that it does.

"So, let's try one. Close your eyes. Now, imagine two cars, each driving sixty miles an hour, heading straight toward each other. Quick: what happens?"

An eager young man raises his hand.

"What's your name?" you ask.

"Charles."

"What happens, Charles?"

"They crash." To illustrate, he makes the sounds of crashing, which apparently involves a good deal of saliva.

Some of the other children giggle. A number of hands are withdrawn from the air.

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You smile. "Yes, I suppose that's one possibility. Let's think of other things that might happen too. Be creative. Your name?"

"John."

"What happens, John?"

"They put on their brakes and stop just in time?"

"Good. What else might happen? Think of crazy stuff."

A chubby redhead raises her hand.

"What's your name?" you ask.

"Carol. One of them stands up on giant wheels and drives over the other one?"

"That's stupid," says Charles.

You shrug. "I think it's actually quite interesting. Thank you, Carol." Carol sticks her tongue out at Charles, who in reply raises a middle finger. "I saw that, Charles," you warn. Mrs. Lipsig snickers. "Anyone else have ideas?"

Without raising her hand, a surly-looking girl says, "One of them flies up in the air."

"Another possibility. See how many we're coming up with? Let's keep going."

On the far side of the circle sits a boy by himself, seemingly oblivious. You catch his eye. "What's your name?"

He examines you before answering. "Michael."

Mrs. Lipsig stirs in her chair.

"What do you think happens, Michael?" you ask.

The boy cocks his head. "Nothing of consequence."

You chuckle. "Okay. Why is that?"

"Because one car is in Boston and the other is in Topeka."

"I'm sorry?" you ask.

"They are headed directly toward each other, as you say, but are hundreds of miles apart, which you didn't say."

"Wow," you reply. "That's very creative thinking, Michael. Good job."

"Want to know more?" Michael asks, smiling.

"Sure."

"The car in Boston is driven by Joe Eckmair, an unemployed machinist who is three sheets to the wind and just minutes away from

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committing vehicular manslaughter. The one in Topeka is driven by Shelly Kurkowski, who will arrive home to find her husband boinking her sister. She will then proceed to take his pitching wedge — "

"Form a line for lunch!" interrupts Mrs. Lipsig.

"But we just had lunch," Charlie protests.

"Recess. Recess!"

Most of the children flit eagerly into the hallway.

"But we already had recess too," observes a straggler.

"Shut up," says another.

You pull Mrs. Lipsig aside. "You think I might have a few minutes alone with Michael?" you ask.

She calls the boy back before joining the other children outside.

When the two of you are alone, you call Michael to you.

"Yes?" he asks.

You motion him closer.

"What?"

Closer.

"I'm going outside," he says suspiciously.

The shot must be administered in the roof of the mouth; certainly not the most convenient place. But you're good at it, and before his surprise has fully registered, you lay his limp body gently on the floor.

It's difficult to get into schools undetected, but quite easy to leave, and no one asks questions as you exit with an oversized duffle bag. Your boss often accuses you of grandstanding, asking why you don't just examine the kids in their homes like all of the other agents. The ostensible answer is that you need to check classmates for cross-contamination; the truth is it's just more fun this way.

"You're a bad person," says the duffle bag from the back seat.

"Probably," you admit, keeping your eyes on the road. The plastic zip ties are plenty strong enough to restrain him.

"I can't breathe."

You reach back and open the zipper a few inches. "There."

The bag rustles and the boy's head emerges. "This is child abduction."

You shake your head. "Not exactly."

You aren't supposed to speak, but that seems cruel.

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"Mrs. Lipsig is going to report me missing," he says, "and they'll put up a roadblock."

"Nope."

"What do you mean? She is."

"Mrs. Lipsig is walking back into the classroom right about now, feeling vaguely like she is missing something," you say. "But she has no idea what."

"The other kids will notice."

"Maybe. But most won't care. A few may ask where you are, but they won't pursue it. Those who do will be ignored, as children usually are."

"The police will catch you eventually."

"Nope."

After processing this, he says, "When I don't come home, my parents will — "

"Your parents will have their first peaceful evening in years," you interrupt, "without you there as tyrant. They will remember you like a canceled TV show from last season. A show whose name they have forgotten."

"That's a mean thing to say."

You consider this. "Yes, I suppose it is."

You merge onto the expressway and engage the cruise control.

"Look," you say. "I don't even need to talk to you. It doesn't matter, in the end."

There is silence from the back seat, then, "I don't understand."

That's true, you know. You sigh and decide, for the umpteenth time, to try to explain it all to one of them. For all the good it does.

"Let's play the hypothetical game again," you suggest.

"Okay."

"Say, hypothetically, that there is a parasite."

After a pause, the boy asks, "What kind of parasite?"

"A very old one. Don't ask me to get too specific, because I'm just the brawn of the operation. But somehow this parasite feeds off neural energy. You know what that is?"

"Of course," he says. "We all feed off energy, if you think about it. What about the sun?"

"That's good," you agree. "Anyway, say that over thousands of years

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this parasite has developed a taste for a special type of neural energy. One that is especially strong in bright prepubescent children."

"You aren't from the University, are you?" the boy asks.

"No," you admit. You glance back just to be sure he is still in the bag. "Say these parasites, once embedded in an appropriate host, can actually enhance the host's neural activity. By a lot."

"Isn't that a symbiotic relationship?" he asks.

"It might be," you say. "But it doesn't work out that way. Something about these things brings out an arrogant, nasty streak in the hosts. Not all the time, but when it gets hungry."

"Many people are arrogant and nasty."

"That's true," you say. "But there's something else. The adults who are close to these children, they start to lose their minds."

"Why?"

"We don't know. They sap intelligence somehow. Like some sort of wireless network, I guess. It's one of the signs, one of the ways we know how to find you."

It allows the pronoun to pass without comment.

"Do they know it?"

"Who?" you ask.

"The...parasites. Do they know...what they are?"

"No. They aren't intelligent in and of themselves. They need the host. And they don't communicate with each other, any more than cold viruses communicate with each other. So there is no shared knowledge, no culture, so to speak. Each one is like — "

"A child?" it says.

You drive for a number of miles before it asks, "What will happen to me?"

You look in the rearview mirror, though you can't see the bag in it. "In a few days, Michael will wake up in bed, his mind wiped clean," you explain. "He will be sort of like an amnesia victim. He'll remember certain things, like how to speak and what the state capitals are, but nothing about himself. He will be a bright boy, though not as bright as he has been led to believe." You allow this to register. "Nothing can be done for the adults."

"What will happen to *me*?" it asks.

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You exit the expressway without answering.

As you pull into the extraction facility, you program the GPS for San Diego, for which you must leave immediately in order to catch the end of a chess tournament. Reports have reached you of a prodigy there, one who is consistently beating players five times his age.

The chess kids are sometimes real, you know. But not often.

As you open the rear door to grab the duffle bag, you think about Mrs. Lipsig and the parents of the boy named Michael. For the rest of their lives they will remain immersed in a childlike dream, without hope of recovering the mental trappings of adulthood.

They will never appreciate the responsibilities they once had, never strive for efficiency, never regain the ability to comprehend sarcasm, or guilt, or the knowledge of good and evil.

You rezip the duffel bag, and envy them.

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

SUPERPOWERS DO NOT A SUPERHERO MAKE

COMIC books, god love them, have done something terrible to movies over the years. They have made film audiences think of fantasy and sf heroes — the kind with "super powers," anyway — only as creatures in funny costumes with capes and tights, or at least Academy Award-winning makeup jobs. An actor like Tobey Maguire (with the help of equally talented writers and a very gifted director) may manage to imbue his Spider-Man character with an everyman believability and a vulnerable charm. But he is nonetheless a guy in a getup — a cartoonish hero with a secondary life as a human being.

Novels are less inclined to communicate with costumes and props. They don't need to. They can delve into character and situation more deeply and create a hero who has extraordinary gifts as well as a fully integrated humanity. With more time and word-power, as well as the unfettered imagination of their reader, they can create a superhero without the cartoonish visual shortcuts.

Hollywood loves visual shortcuts, of course; which is why comic books have so often been translated into major motion pictures, while countless superlative sf and fantasy novels have been ignored for screen adaptation, or have languished for eternity in development limbo.

I was, therefore, very cautiously cheered to learn that Steven Gould's *Jumper* was being adapted for the screen. Gould's 1992 "Young Adult" novel is a coming-of-age tale, as you would expect, and so much more. The story's protagonist, a shy seventeen-year-old named David Rice, discovers his ability to teleport by the second page of the novel. But it

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is not during a science experiment or while at Wizard's school. He discovers this talent, accidentally, while desperately yearning to escape yet another savage beating by his abusive alcoholic father. Likewise, Davy's second experience in "jumping" comes after he has run away from home, when he is about to be raped by a group of truckers with a taste for sick recreation.

In both of these early cases, the fear of intense trauma allows Gould's hero to dematerialize himself from danger, only to reappear in one of the few places he associates with comfort and safety — the fiction stacks of his hometown library.

One of the things I liked about *Jumper* was that no real explanation was ever offered for Davy's amazing talent. Elaborate quantum physics theorems were never offered. And he wasn't born on another planet, bit by a spider, struck by lightning, or trained in the black arts. David is, it seems, merely a lonely, fallibly human, freak of nature — an identification that most young people and a good number of their elders can readily relate to (even without the swell costumes of the X-Men).

As a runaway teen without parental permission or proper identification and documentation for gainful employment, David feels that he has few options for funding food and shelter when he arrives in the Big Apple. So he decides to support a new life by making a massive, nonviolent, and completely illegal withdrawal from a major New York bank. David's ultimate cat-burglar operations, along with his sexual awakening in the company of an older woman (a college student) named Millie, are among the reasons some parents demanded that *Jumper* be pulled from library shelves. (But there is no doubt in my mind that librarians will always go to the mat protecting a book like *Jumper* and a hero like David, who so clearly values books, learning, and libraries...even more than his ill-gotten gains.)

Jumper would be a powerful teen boy fantasy if all David did was live comfortably from theft, visit nifty locales on a whim, and bed his girlfriend. But David and his creator obviously expect more than that of this extraordinary young man. While he continues to struggle with the emotional aftermath of losing his mother (who ran away) and being exposed to the emotional and physical abuse of his father during his formative years — a

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struggle the book repeatedly explores — David does not become a simple, self-involved hedonist.

Although he doesn't don a rubber suit or brightly colored spandex, David nonetheless becomes his own style of social avenger. Early on, he makes sure that his would-be rapist suffers for his sins. He later unnerves or humiliates a few brutal men, including a couple of controlling contemporaries who don't know how to treat women with respect. And then, after some investigation, he is reunited with his long-lost (and guilt-stricken) mother, only to have her murdered by a Middle-Eastern terrorist.

Yes, David's personal history might be a touch too aggrieved, but it certainly keeps the reader involved and sympathetic. And remember, this is a pre-9/11 story, so it is almost unnerving to read of David's subsequent adventures trying to save victims of terrorist hijackings worldwide, with an eye toward not only protecting the innocent, but also taking vengeance upon the man who killed his mother. All the while, he must also elude government agents who want to command or destroy him.

The combination of a fear and hatred of terrorism with a profound resentment and distrust toward an American government with little concern for the civil liberties of its own citizens makes the novel a very timely and compelling story, still. A tale like this would have made a rip-roaring movie. Too bad it never happened.

For after Doug Liman, director of the cynical *(Swingers, Go)* as well as the action-packed *(The Bourne Identity, Mr. & Mrs. Smith)*, his committee of producers, plus two additional screenwriters, Jim Uhls *(Fight Club)* and Simon Kinberg *(X-Men: The Last Stand)*, finished reworking the adaptation David S. Goyer *(Batman Begins, Blade)* did of Mr. Gould's story, we are left with eviscerations, electrocution, torture, and explosions galore, but very little of the humanity and none of the heroism of the original novel's David.

Am I surprised by this fact? Not at all. Am I disappointed by it? Mightily.

In the film, David's father (despite the fact that he is played by the perennially scary Michael Rooker) is shown to be cranky, but not really vicious. This negates the need to escape abuse by either teleporting or running away. Thus, from the start, it becomes clear that neither character development nor emotionally valid motivation will

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have much to do with the action of the movie.

Still, there is plenty of action to be had. Some of it has to do with destroying public libraries. But none of it has to do with avenging social wrongs. Instead, after an initial bank heist by a young David (Max Thieriot), we see the full-grown David (Hayden Christensen) leading his life. And the life David leads is one of elitist self-indulgence. It's all about the Manhattan penthouse, baby — full of the latest toys and walls of pictures of David's favorite "jump sites." A picnic lunch on the head of the Sphinx is a regular event. Then there's an instantaneous jaunt to London to pick up a hot blonde at a bar. After he climbs out of her bed, there's no need for polite chat or to pretend he'll be calling again. In an instant he is off surfing the Pacific, jumping here and there in pursuit of the perfect wave.

Presumably this setup is designed to suit the fantasy tastes of the young male movie demographic Liman likes to court. Unfortunately, it does nothing to make the rest of us care about what happens to David.

In any case, it's an easy life of sybaritic pursuits until our young playboy finds a man (Samuel L. Jackson, doing his bad-ass shtick in a freaky close-cropped bleached 'do) back at his bachelor pad. For no reason that he knows of, the man seems intent on torturing and killing him. Is he the father of one of David's conquests? Evidently not. We later learn that Jackson's character, Roland, is a lead henchman in a (never really explained) quasi-religious, vigilante assassins' agency called the Paladins. This powerful and clearly well-funded group views jumpers as an "abomination," and their sole purpose in life seems to be murdering all the teleporters they can hunt down.

Bummer.

So what does our bright boy, who's been on his own in the big city for years, do? Of course, he goes back to his old home town and looks up the woman he claims to have loved since he was five. Nothing like waiting until an über-relentless army of killers is on your trail to look up an old flame.

And it is the portrayal of the character of Millie (in the movie, played by *The O.C.*'s Rachel Bilson) that is one of the most disappointing aspects of this adaptation. Mr. Gould's Millie is a smart, independent-minded college student who becomes the confidante, comforter, as well as love interest of young David. (And in a later Gould book

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she even discovers her own talent for jumping.) Ms. Bilson is a lovely and luscious young lass, but you feel certain that the director hired her primarily for her ability to fill out a tank top. No offense, Rachel, but I'm not the one objectifying you....this movie is.

The movie's Millie never got out of her home town, or even, it appears, out from under the shadow of the thuggish boyfriend she had when she was sixteen. She is now a barmaid who tosses down a Budweiser while she is on the job. (Tank top and Budweiser — must be another nod to the adolescent male audience!) She's happy enough to run off to Rome with the long-missing David at a moment's notice, until she realizes that her old childhood pal displays some unusual talents and has a small army of determined dudes trying to blow him, her, and everything she owns clear to kingdom come.

Millie spends much of the rest of the movie flapping her hands and yelling, when she isn't trussed up as jumper bait. It's a sad fate for Steven Gould's female hero to meet. But semi-slutty damsel in distress is about all we've come to expect from women characters in Hollywood actioners.

It's not just the role of "the girl" that's underdeveloped in *Jumper*. The hero (if I can use that term) is also as wooden and dull as any I've seen in a long time. This is largely the fault of a team of writers who seemed to go out of their way to make their protagonist shallow and unsympathetic. It is also partially the fault of a director who is plainly more interested in the logistics of shooting a breakneck live-action sequence in an assortment of unusual locales than he is in character development. And, yes, this is also a problem with casting. Hayden Christensen is a good-looking young man. But his only two facial expressions seem to convey petulance and boredom. (And, no, I don't think he was any better in the second Star Wars trilogy.) As I say, he's an attractive presence. Still, if I may do a bit of objectifying of my own, I fear that Mr. Christensen is better suited as a Calvin Klein underwear model than he is a lead actor in a major motion picture.

Discounting all the postcard scenery (like Rome's Colliseum), there is but one saving grace in *Jumper*. And that is the performance by Jamie Bell as a British-born jumper named Griffin. Griffin is first seen tsk-tsking in the background as David carelessly exposes himself as a teleporter. Griffin

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knows that he is on the Paladin hit list and he is happy to return the favor. He seems intent on taking out as many of the secret assassins as possible. Griffin tries to educate his clueless cohort, but for his troubles only gets drawn into David's showdown with Roland.

The role of Griffin is poorly developed, too. But Jamie Bell (who has been an underutilized but obviously gifted film actor since he played the title character in *Billy Elliot*) nonetheless makes the most of the part. A punkish Puck with a need for speed and a (necessarily) solitary nature, Griffin is the one character in the movie that we both like and care about. Too bad he isn't the central hero of *Jumper*.

Does a man with superpowers need to be a "Superhero"? Probably not. Still, as they say, to whom much is given, much is expected. When a fictional hero is endowed with extraordinary gifts, it seems a shame to squander them entirely on personal pleasures or running away from enemies. Steven Gould understands this, so as you choose where to allocate your entertainment dollars, I would advise sticking to his original novels.

In the movie *Jumper*, it is almost as if the filmmakers made a conscious decision to keep their protagonist from applying his talent to the greater good. Early on, we see the hedonistic penthouse David watch a news story on his wide screen TV about a natural disaster on the other side of the globe. Victims are isolated and trapped, the narrator intones, and it seems unlikely that anyone can get to them in time to save them.

Great, I thought. David is going to teleport in and use his wealth and powers to help those folks. But, no. That's actually when he pops off to London for the cool drinks and the hot babe.

Did the filmmakers mean to make the point that David was not yet ready to help others in that scene? Who knows? The moment is never developed or explained. It is simply plunked into the film, seemingly as a meaningless tableau. Similarly, when Griffin and David are feuding late in the movie, they briefly jump into the middle of a civil war battle in Chechnya. It makes no sense, of course. Why would you plop yourself into a place where you are likely to get yourself accidentally shot, when a band of assassins is already trying to kill you?

I'm assuming that the filmmakers did this simply to place David and Griffin in a place where they

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could set off more gunfire and whizbang explosions. After all, bloody civil strife makes for a fun location shot; at least when callous filmmakers and self-involved screen characters are involved.

At a certain point in the pointless proceedings, Roland attempts to justify why he kills jumpers. They have unnatural god-like powers, he explains, and he needs to destroy them before they go completely bad. After watching this movie, I'm on Roland's side.

COMING ATTRACTIONS

BACK IN 2002, Charles Coleman Finlay introduced us to Maxim Nikomedes in "The Political Officer," a story that one critic described as "John Le Carré in space." Next month, we'll pick up Max's story as he returns from space and deals with consequences — and if you need a hint that all doesn't go well, consider the title of the story: "The Political Prisoner."

For those of you who would rather read about adventures in space, we've got something for you, too: Tim Sullivan's "Planetesimal Dawn" takes us about 88 light years from Earth, to an asteroid in the vicinity of Gamma Crucis.

We've got plenty of other fantasy and science fiction stories lined up (as our title might suggest), including new stories by Jim Aikin, Fred Chappell, Carolyn Ives Gilman, and Robert Reed. Our annual October/November anniversary issue is shaping up nicely, with stories by Stephen King and Steven Utley slated to run in it. Subscribe online at *www.fandsf.com* or use the business reply card in this issue to make sure that you won't miss any of the stories we've got in store for you.

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Science fiction and fantasy readers are sometimes accused of being a bit provincial, but our editors are so cosmopolitan and wide-ranging that we even read the message boards of other magazines. It's true! Recently we spotted an interesting discussion at www.asimovs.com *on the subject of alternate history stories, specifically about what distinguishes good ones from bad. Here we offer up a fine — if grim — example of the form, a tale that looks back at the Second World War with a keen and unflinching eye.*

Poison Victory

By Albert E. Cowdrey

2 *SEPTEMBER 1949.* ORDERED to appear at the prison in Kalach this morning. The Gestapo's nabbed a serf named Nevsky who claims to be one of mine. The charge: terrorism.

Poor devil was already a mass of blood and bruises. *Oberstürmführer* Müller — an insufferable little beast dressed up in a new black uniform with the silver skull insignia — wanted me to identify him. I wouldn't have known him even before they worked him over.

"You're aware that I have over a thousand serfs?"

"Yes, the biggest landholder in the Great Bend of the Don," said Müller, voice dripping with envy. "Perhaps you have too many for proper control."

"What exactly is the charge against this man?"

Well, he'd been spotted carrying a rook rifle.

"Is it conceivable that he may have been shooting rooks? The peasants hate them because they steal grain."

"It is absolutely forbidden for a serf to have a weapon of any type whatever. As you may be aware, we live in uneasy times."

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"I suppose you mean the guerrillas. Perhaps dealing with them is too big a job for the SS, and that's why you're unable to exert proper control."

Rather a neat riposte, I thought. They can't catch this guerrilla chieftain who calls himself the Ataman, so in order to look busy they arrest a peasant with a pellet gun. I can see the report they'll send to that Eichmann fellow who struts around as Reich Protector of the East: *An armed Russian was arrested and under severe interrogation confessed to —*

Whatever they please. And I can do nothing. Eichmann would automatically reject any appeal on Nevsky's behalf, and I'd merely get myself even deeper into his black book. *Scheissdreck!*

Took the Porsche for a drive up the new Volga parkway, hoping to recover my equanimity and clear the smell of the prison out of my head.

A few kilometers were enough to heal my spirit. What a glorious country this is! The rolling, wheat-heavy steppe, birds wheeling and crying, sunlight the color of pollen. Some of my serfs were helping to landscape the parkway, and they paused in their work to take off their caps, the honest fellows! I gave them that stiff half-salute that makes Marya tell me I must think I'm waving a scepter.

Near Führerburg I turned onto a side road, parked in a peaceful spot, and lit up a cigarette. The city lay before me — the Krupp-Ost factory, the new worker housing under construction, pillars of steam and smoke staining the clear air. At that distance the Victory Monument on the old Tartar burial mound of the Mamayev Kurgan seemed only an enigmatic shape, and the sun slanting through veils of smoke gave it a grandeur it entirely lacks when clearly seen.

God, what a hell this place was once! How many beloved comrades died for it! How many brave Slavs were entombed here beside them! They say you can't dig a cellar without finding bones. I accept the view endorsed by so many experts — English and American as well as German — that we Aryans form a superior race. And yet in death, when the brain is gone and nothing lingers but the bones and the soul, how hard it is to tell Russian from German, serf from master!

Shaking off these grim thoughts, I started the engine and drove to my fine new townhouse overlooking the Tsaritsa Gorges. A kiss from Marya.

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Dinner, then my daily task of filling a few pages in this journal. I visualize the text in English, which all Germans of my generation had to learn, then transpose it into my personal cipher. Rather a simple one, as anyone managing to read this must know! But it will have to do — I don't have an Enigma machine, and if I did I'd be afraid to use it, after all we've learned recently about the work of English code-breakers.

Marya is preparing for bed, humming an old Cossack folk song as she shrugs into a nightgown embroidered with little roses. A faint smile lights her round face, like the face of a *matryushka* doll, and her slanted eyes touch me lightly with a certain glance. She says, "Are you going to scribble in that silly notebook all night?"

Nein, meine Liebe, nein! A moment only, and I'll put it away inside my big, ornate presentation copy of *The Complete Writings and Speeches of Adolf Hitler* — in the space I've hollowed out with a razor (as if the original contents weren't hollow enough!). Then back into the safe my silent friend and father confessor will go, for the time has come to live my life, not write about it.

3 September 1949. Waked at 0530 by a call from Müller's adjutant. Nevsky has been beheaded by guillotine.

Very curious, this fondness of the Gestapo for the chief implement of the French Reign of Terror. At least it's painless, unlike their other methods involving piano wire and meat hooks.

I was ordered to drive Nevsky's family out onto the road to starve, as a warning to others. Well, one advantage of being a big landowner is that I can move them to another of my villages, where they'll lie hidden until the whole episode is forgotten. Sent Marya to the estate to take charge of this duty, which I'm sure she will discharge with her usual cleverness and womanly compassion.

Meanwhile, I sat down to deal with a vast pile of paperwork generated by the bureaucrats at the *Ostministerium*. I'd barely started on this unpleasant duty when the telephone rang again. I picked it up with foreboding, only to hear — with astonishment — a friendly voice!

My wartime comrade Dietrich Wallenstein had arrived, all the way from Berlin. At once I abandoned my task and drove, a happy man, to the Veteran Officers Club where Dietrich was staying. And there he sat at the

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bar, clutching an elegant new attaché case and looking as much like his old self as anybody can after gaining thirty kilos. Well, he's a big cheese now, a troubleshooter for the General Staff, so I suppose he comes by his big gut honestly.

Soon he and I were seated at a quiet table, a schnapps bottle and two glasses between us. When I asked for news, he passed one fat hand over the pepper-and-salt bristles on his head and responded, "*Na,* can you guess who's become a nobleman?"

I groaned. "Not you!"

"*Jawohl!* I am now Graf von und zu Rostock."

"Another Nazi nobleman," I said, when we'd toasted his new distinction. "And to think how Hitler hated the aristocracy!"

He leaned toward me, small pouchy eyes gleaming. "It grieves me deeply to tell you this," he whispered, "but our beloved Führer is dying."

No surprise there. On 20 April of this year — his sixtieth birthday — Hitler visited the Volga frontier to see the War Memorial dedicated. I was granted the honor of being seated close enough to smell his farts, which were frequent. He looked dreadful — gray-faced, trembling. Astounding contrast with the heroic figure on the monument. I'm surprised he's lasted this long.

I nodded, and Dietrich went on, his voice sinking even lower: "Last week there was a funeral rehearsal at the Great Hall of the Reich. Pal of mine's a theatrical director, did some work with Riefenstahl, and he was in on it. The whole thing's to be broadcast on television — first time ever — so Goebbels had actors play the leading Nazis to get the lighting perfect. They got hold of a 300-kilo freak from the circus to stand in for Göring. Since he was too fat to walk, a couple of Polish serfs wheeled him in. Everybody had to keep a straight face, but I understand there was a lot of giggling in the wings.

"By the way," he added casually, "you've been invited to the funeral. I made sure of that."

"I won't go."

"Oh, yes you will. I'll tell you frankly, rumors have reached Reich Security that you're no longer politically reliable. High time for you to do some fence-mending, old boy! Attend the ceremony, look solemn, wipe away a tear, salute like an automaton, and prepare to enjoy the spectacle when the long knives start flashing. Things are going to get nasty as the

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satraps fight for the succession. With luck, they'll kill one another off, and the Nazi business will be over for good. Here — take this."

He handed me the attaché case, a capacious one covered in crocodile skin. Inside were some welcome gifts and one unwelcome one. A framed enlargement of an old photograph — God knows how it survived — of Dietrich and me during that other life we lived during the war. Also a bottle of good Scotch whiskey, and six cartons of real Virginia cigarettes. All most welcome and deeply appreciated. But also a large envelope of heavy cream-laid paper, with black borders and an embossed swastika, which was *not* appreciated.

"I don't see why I've got to go at all," I complained. "I'm no politician, not even a soldier anymore."

"My friend, you're a hero. That's your burden, so don't try to escape it now. Without you we'd have lost Stalingrad — pardon me, Führerburg — and then the whole war would've been in the toilet."

He leaned forward and gently struck my shoulder with his closed fist. "I've always regarded you as Germany's savior. The monument on the Mamayev Kurgan should be to you."

I had to turn away for a moment to hide my emotions, which as usual were contradictory and troubling. Dietrich has a heavy thumb, and he'd put it down on my greatest shame and my sole claim to historical importance — that to save my life and the lives of my comrades, I made it possible for Hitler and his cronies to dominate the world.

When I regained my composure, our talk turned to practical matters. Dietrich warned me that the guerrillas are growing bolder. I should watch out for the Ataman. He's supported by the Russian government in Siberia, and Khrushchev — that crude, tough Ukrainian peasant who overthrew and executed Stalin — is receiving aid from the British and Americans.

"So don't," said Dietrich, "be surprised if some very sophisticated weapons start showing up in guerrilla hands. We're *die Übermacht*, the superpower. Naturally, everybody hates us."

Then it was time for him to go about his business — something secret, he didn't discuss it with me. I tried to return his attaché case, but he absolutely refused. The container, he said, was part of the gift. We gripped each other's hands and he exclaimed, *"Auf wiedersehen, mein alter Freund und Kriegskamerad!"*

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Farewell, my old friend and wartime comrade — words that sounded to me like the end of a funeral oration.

Marya was waiting for me on my return home. I asked how the widow's holding up, and she shrugged, "Pretty well."

"It must be hard for her."

"Sure it is. But we all have to bear what we have to bear. Life's not just a walk across a field, you know."

That's a peasant saying. One hears it everywhere.

She tells me she hid the family in Gorodok village, where hatred of the Gestapo is so intense that betrayal is unlikely. Last year the Orthodox priest there turned out to be an SS informer. On a winter's night, in thirty degrees of frost, his house caught fire and he and his family were roasted alive. Later, Marya told me she'd heard that the door and the window shutters had been nailed shut. Yes, I think Nevsky's survivors will be safe enough there.

4 September 1949. This evening I'm all alone in my country house on the banks of the "quiet flowing" Don. Here on my 5000-hectare estate I truly feel like the great feudal lord I'm supposed to be. But also, in Marya's absence, quite lonely.

The wheat harvest's beginning, and like old Tolstoy I'd hoped to join the peasants in some good, honest toil. Alas, it was not to be. I spent the whole day on the damned phone, trying to find the new tractors I'd ordered. Meanwhile the serfs began reaping with scythes, and I crossed my fingers, hoping the Gestapo wouldn't decide those are weapons too, and arrest my whole workforce.

Tonight all's peaceful. Outside the circle of light cast by my lamp the shadows press close. In the country darkness crickets are shrilling, no idea in their little heads how soon the first frost will arrive. Seemed like a perfect time to open my new attaché case and take out the photograph, the whiskey, a few packs of cigarettes I brought with me, and of course the *Writings and Speeches*. The fact that I choose to hide my treasonable journal inside Hitler's book is, I suppose, an example of heavy Teutonic irony. But then, as Marya sometimes hints, I am a rather heavily ironic Teuton, in my own way!

This month is a dark anniversary for me. Just seven years ago, I

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arrived on the Eastern Front for the very first time. A lifetime, no an age ago.

I'm staring at the picture now, hardly able to recognize the skinny young fellow in the wire-rim glasses who stands beside grinning Dietrich. Twenty-nine I was then, old enough to have missed the Hitler Youth and all that Nazi rubbish. Something of a child despite my age, the product of a loving home and years of quiet work in schools and laboratories. A frightened child too, for in those days we Germans dreaded an assignment to Russia as Christians feared an assignment to Hell.

Never will I forget my first sight of Stalingrad from the rattletrap old Messerschmidt that brought me. First, brown streamers of smoke rising and dirtying the pure late-summer air. Then the city itself, its broken buildings like headstones in a desecrated graveyard. We bumped and shuddered down on the pockmarked runway, and I climbed stiffly off the plane like a damned soul disembarking on the wrong side of the River Styx. It didn't help that two dusty, disheveled veterans unloading my spotless new luggage grinned and asked sardonically, "How's the weather in Berlin, sir?"

At HQ I met Dietrich for the first time. He was an adjutant and took me in charge, finding me a place to sleep, then arranging a five-minute meeting with General Friedrich Von Paulus. My new commander wasn't at all what I'd expected — a pale, cool, fastidious man who spoke courteously even to a *Grünschnabel* like me. Later on, Dietrich confided that the general always wore clean underwear, even on the battlefield.

"He's what the Tommies call a *gentleman*," he explained, using the English word. "More scientist than soldier, I'd say. You two ought to get on well, though why in the world we need a chemical officer I'm sure I don't know."

Yes, that was my title. I was straight out of the I.G. Farben laboratories in Frankfurt-am-Main, where I'd hoped to evade military service by doing research for the war effort. Instead, by 1942 we'd lost so many men in the East that the army was ready to grab anybody — even me!

Dietrich and I soon became pals, and began calling each other *du* instead of the formal *Sie* — in fact, the photo records the day we sealed our friendship by drinking a small glass of schnapps with linked arms. A good

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fellow to know. He'd already developed his remarkable talent for getting his superiors to do whatever he wanted them to, and within a month, at his suggestion, Von Paulus relieved me of my useless task as chemical officer and made me his personal aide.

As a result, I was soon learning things about the war that I'd rather not have known. Our atrocities, for example. The full history of our treatment of the Jews has never been written and now, I suppose, never will be. At home one was aware of the vulgar Nazi attacks on them, which began with insults and ended with mob assaults. Nonpolitical people like my family thought the whole business a *Kulturschande,* a blot on civilization, and we averted our eyes as I suppose civilized Americans avert theirs from the lynchers who murder their blacks.

Russia made such evasion impossible. In our own army area, seventy-five Jewish orphans were imprisoned by the SS under vile conditions, then ordered to be shot. When Colonel Mannstein, our chief of staff, tried to save them, the SS sent in a party of Ukrainian militiamen who murdered all the children right under our noses. I was present when Mannstein stormed into HQ and shouted at Von Paulus, "We can't and shouldn't be allowed to win this war!"

Some commanders would have backed him up — others would have arrested him. Typically, Von Paulus did neither. He merely listened, shook his head, said nothing. I thought this cowardly of him, little guessing the role I myself would play in the war. Today he's Chief of Staff in Berlin and I'm a great feudal lord in the East, while Mannstein's broken bones lie in some Gestapo killing ground, buried in quicklime. In 1944 he joined a group that tried to assassinate Hitler; he was betrayed, arrested, tortured in a disgusting manner, and strangled in six stages with a piano-wire noose.

Is this always the fate of the decent and the brave? Will Von Paulus now take vengeance for him and all other victims of the regime by staging a military coup? Surely his chance will come after the Nazis have finished bloodying one another. Looking back on the cautious general I first got to know in the autumn of '42, I have deep doubts whether he possesses the nerve for desperate deeds. Yet at Stalingrad he did one thing that was totally out of character, and by doing it saved all of us — yes, and the Führer too.

* * *

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5 September 1949. All day hard at work outside. Glorious weather!

The new tractors finally arrived, but with them came a human pimple from the *Ostministerium*, who informed me that only Germans can drive them! He spouted the usual rubbish that only Aryans can handle complex machinery, when the real purpose of the SS is to prevent Russians from learning to do anything but the crudest hand labor. They are to become a people without skills, without knowledge, even without songs.

Well, we didn't have any Aryans available, so I sent the pimple away, put my men and women into the drivers' seats, and off they went to do the job. Many had been trained as tractor drivers on the collective farms that still existed a mere nine years ago, so why not make use of them? Another black mark against my name in Herr Müller's book, damn him, and another tidbit he can pass on to Eichmann.

I returned to the country house about sixteen o'clock, greatly in need of a bath and a nap, both of which I took. Waking refreshed, I found that Marya had arrived to help with the harvest. So we made love, a fine ending to a fine day. I need her to remind me that I'm still a young man in years, even though old in spirit.

And now I sit here once again, pen in hand, ready to encode my memories. My lethal memories. Oh yes, they are deadly. For I am one of the few still living who know how we really won the war. Now perhaps the time has come to set it down, even if only in cipher.

THE BATTLE had been raging for a month when I arrived in Stalingrad. Much of the city had been ground and pummeled to a coarse dust, and the first chill wind of the approaching fall swept up the grit and scoured my face like a sandstorm.

The ruins stank of cordite, feces, rotting corpses. Everywhere were hidden ditches and sewers and storm drains, from which Ivans would suddenly emerge with tommyguns blazing. Shrapnel-battered steel and concrete buildings had to be cleared of their defenders floor by floor — one such fortress held out against fifty-eight days of continuous assault. We paid a heavier toll of men to win a single block of Stalingrad than to conquer whole western nations.

We'd already lost so many that our flanks were held by our Axis allies,

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all of them ill-equipped and unhappy to be fighting so far from home. Von Paulus was too intelligent not to see the danger in this situation. And he was getting disturbing reports from patrols and from the Luftwaffe about vast enemy movements to the north and south of the city.

A terrible scenario formed in his mind, and began to invade his dreams.

I slept in the same bunker as he, and one night heard him cry out. I ran into his quarters and found him awake, sitting up on his cot, shivering and rubbing his eyes. In a whisper, he told me that in a nightmare he'd seen the Russians assail both our flanks at once, trapping the whole Sixth Army in a vast encirclement. Next day I whispered the story of the general's dream to Dietrich, and he expressed deep concern.

"Still, what can be done?" he shrugged, with true Teutonic fatalism. "If it happens, it's *unsere Schicksal,* our destiny. That's all."

Well, *I* thought something could be done. That evening when the general and I were alone for a few moments, I presumed to tell him a secret known to very few. The laboratory where I'd worked in Frankfurt had invented a war gas that could defeat the Russians, if only we dared to use it.

"Poison gas?" he asked skeptically. "Everybody used it in the last war. A cruel and stupid weapon that made war uncomfortable, to no purpose. Anyway, Hitler's forbidden its use, maybe for personal reasons. You know he was temporarily blinded by gas in 1918. Or maybe he's simply afraid of Allied retaliation."

"*Herr Generaloberst,* this is not your ordinary war gas."

I told him how, back in the thirties, one of our chemists began to fear that he was going blind. A microscopic amount of a new organic insecticide had caused the pupils of his eyes to close part way, shutting out the light. In time we learned that the chemical was a cholinesterase inhibitor. The precise formula was a closely held secret, but everyone could see how it worked — it affected the motor nerves so that the muscles could contract, but could not relax.

It was given the name Tabun. In larger quantities it caused violent cramps, followed by convulsions of the whole body and paralysis of the muscles that control breathing. Conventional gas masks were useless, and even rubber suits couldn't protect fully against it. We now had three types of the gas: Sarin was twice as toxic as Tabun, Soman three times as toxic as Sarin.

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"Well then," said the General, who had been listening with obvious distaste, "we can't use it. Our lines are often only a few meters from the Ivans. We'd be poisoning our own men."

"Then don't use it in the city," I replied eagerly, quite forgetting my inferior rank. "With Luftwaffe cooperation you can use heavy bombers to break up the enemy concentrations to the north and south of us, and also on the east bank of the Volga. When the enemy forces in the city have no support and receive no reinforcements, we can destroy them."

He shook his head wearily.

"A pretty theory! And how long would it take to manufacture the quantities we'd need and load it into bombs?"

"It's already there. Slave labor from three concentration camps has been at it for years, suffering great losses in the process. Himmler himself gave the green light to make the bombs and stockpile them in underground arsenals, in case Hitler ever gives permission to use them."

"And you expect some bureaucrat in Munitions to defy Hitler's orders and ship this stuff to us?"

"Not a bureaucrat. The new Munitions Minister. I met him years ago at the Berlin Institute of Technology. His name's Albert Speer. He's the Führer's fair-haired boy, and because of that he can take risks that nobody else would dare even to think about."

At first Von Paulus wouldn't hear of my idea — indeed, he ordered me not to bring it up again. But reports of the Russian buildup continued to filter in, and the messages we got from higher headquarters diverged farther and farther from reality. One day in mid-October, he brought up the forbidden subject himself.

"I think you need to take leave," he told me abruptly. "Your mother's dying of cancer — didn't know that, did you? She doesn't know it either, the lucky woman. Compassionate leaves are routinely denied, but I'm the commander, and herewith I'm giving you ten days and putting you on the first flight out.

"See your old school chum in Munitions if you can, and if he agrees to supply us the stuff, head for Luftwaffe HQ. I'll give you a letter to a friend of mine, a general in Transport Command. The weapons will have to be delivered by air, and quickly. I believe the Ivans will attack us at the first snowfall, or shortly after."

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So that was how it all began. Once in 1947, when I was drunk at the Veteran Officer's Club, I called our triumph *das Giftsieg.* The poison victory. Thank God, everybody else was as drunk as I was and the remark passed unnoticed! There are things that a man who wears two Iron Crosses and the Knight's Cross can say with impunity, and others he cannot.

Yet I spoke the truth, and though I have no religion I can't help but believe that one day I will be called to account by a higher and juster power than the Gestapo. Mannstein was right, after all — we shouldn't have been allowed to win the war.

I know that now. But in 1942 I was twenty-nine and wanted to live, no matter what.

6 September 1949. Another day of splendid weather. Hard work — how beautiful hard work is! The muscles ache, but the spirit knows peace. Then home for a hot bath, a nap, love in the afternoon, and dinner.

And now, late at night, I get back to my self-appointed task as stenographer to Clio, the Muse of History. Speaking of fate, I now realize that this is mine. Like the tyrant in Shakespeare's *Coriolanus,* the Nazis cut out the goddess's tongue so that the crimes of the past cannot be told. But through me she speaks — even though no one may ever listen!

I saw Speer. Handsome as ever, superbly intelligent, yet devoted heart and soul to the Austrian necromancer. So devoted that he would even disobey him in order to save him. Who can explain it? With his promise in my pocket, I hastened to Luftwaffe HQ, where the necessary cargo planes were made available to move the weapons to the Stalingrad Front.

Meantime the Russians too were hard at work. In late October they seized a number of strategic hills inside our lines. As if to aid their attack, winter arrived early with twenty degrees of frost. Intense cold already gripped the northern reaches of the Volga and ice floes drifted past Stalingrad, grinding against each other so loudly that our men in advanced positions could hear them groaning all night, like the souls of the lost.

By then I'd returned from Germany. With Von Paulus's permission I let Dietrich in on the secret, and it became his task to track the movement of the weapons. The nerve-gas bombs were in crates stamped "oxyacetylene cylinders, extra large size," so that he could follow them through

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routine supply messages. On 10 November 1942 an encrypted signal brought word that planes carrying the weapons were even then droning over the snow-powdered fields of western Russia.

At this supreme moment, I found Von Paulus drawn and white. If he failed to use nerve gas, the Russians would destroy him; if he did use it against Hitler's explicit orders, he might be arrested and shot. And I might be shot too, though I could always plead that I was only following orders, something the commander could not do.

I don't think either of us slept more than a few hours during the next five days. Nor did Dietrich, who for the first time in our friendship lost his bouncy good spirits. The usual glitches developed in the rear areas. At an airfield near Rostov where the weapons were to be transferred from the transport planes to the bombers, they were almost lost through a paperwork error. After a frantic search of ninety minutes during which we all aged a year or two, they were discovered in a warehouse, stored among ordinary oxygen and acetylene tanks. If welders had actually used them, the results would indeed have been interesting!

At last came the night of 15 November. I'll never forget it. The weather was still and bitter cold — one of those Russian nights when the Kalmuk steppe seems to hold its breath and even the dead grasses cease to tremble. A thick crust of ice had formed over the autumn snow and lay hard and white as bone under a carborundum sky.

The bomber pilots knew only that they would be dropping some sort of experimental device, and since Hitler was always ranting about secret weapons, they accepted this story without question. Leaving Dietrich behind, I accompanied the General in his staff car to the Italian sector of the line. We were a few kilometers west of the city, a place of acute danger where the Russians held bridgeheads over both the Volga and the Don, and so could attack at will.

We stepped out into the terrible cold, and walked slowly toward the north. The car waited with its blue-shielded headlights off, the motor grunting and a plume of white smoke jetting from the tailpipe. And then we heard overhead the Focke-Wulf-190s droning toward the enemy positions!

White fingers of searchlights began to spring up and the *put-put-put* of distant antiaircraft guns began. The lights would find a plane and lose it again. Tiny objects tumbled through the beams, but we didn't hear the

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usual deep grumble of exploding bombs, for the weapons carried only small charges designed to rupture the casings and disperse the gas. I tried to imagine what it must be like for the Ivans, meeting a silent and incomprehensible death. Then I decided not to think about such things, remembering how back in Frankfurt I'd disgraced myself by passing out during a movie that showed the effects of Tabun on a flock of sheep.

Von Paulus was smoking a cigarette, which of course was strictly against the blackout regulations. He offered one to me, and though I'd never smoked up to that time I felt obliged to take it with a *"Danke, Herr Generaloberst."* He struck a match, I inhaled and promptly went into a coughing fit.

He laughed and slapped me on the back. "That's right, *mein Junge,*" he said. "Stay away from tobacco. It's not healthy."

Next day brought unmistakable evidence of great disorder in the enemy's buildup areas, plus hysterical accusations from Radio Moscow that we had opened gas warfare. Ignoring all of this, plus a barrage of queries from Army Group South trying to find out what was going on, Von Paulus imposed radio silence and ordered a full-scale assault against the Russian positions in Stalingrad.

The time was well chosen. Our troops split the center of the enemy's line and began rolling up the pockets that still held out. After three months of desperate fighting in the greatest urban battle known to history, our sorely tried and war-weary soldiers stood at last upon the riverbank, gazing at the famous Volga — a wide, bleak, turbulent stream surging with brown water and dirty white ice. A sight for which their comrades had already paid a hundred thousand lives!

Now Von Paulus had to face Hitler and tell him what he had done. Cleverly, he sent first a radio message: *Mein Führer! I am pleased to lay at your feet the conquered city of Stalingrad. Your genius in directing this assault now stands clear for all the world to see. Heil Hitler!*

Then he flew off to the Wolfschanze, the Wolf's Lair as Hitler called his headquarters. Whether he would be shot remained in doubt for at least a week, until it became clear that the Western Allies possessed no nerve gas and could not use conventional poison gas to retaliate without running the risk of seeing London and other English cities submerged in clouds of Tabun, Sarin, and Soman.

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Shortly afterward Von Paulus returned, much older in appearance but with the jeweled baton of a Field Marshal clutched in his hand. As so often happens in war, bold action by a local commander achieved what the bigwigs at higher headquarters had failed to do. Of course it was death for anyone to say so — Hitler as usual claimed all the credit for himself, and a falling blade, a bullet, or a wire noose awaited anybody who told the truth.

But truth, like the bones of the dead, has a way of reappearing over time.

7 September 1949. Disturbing news this morning. Müller, the prison commandant, has been found lying in his comfortable country house with his throat cut.

I heard the news from Marya, who got it from a peasant. She whispered that an order went out from the Ataman last week condemning Müller to death for his many cruelties. Of course everybody on the lower Volga knew about it, except us Germans!

I asked her if she had any idea who'd done the deed. She said no, gazing at me with the special limpid innocence in her round face that means she's lying.

"Come now, my girl," said I, "don't try to deceive your old soldier! It wasn't one of our people, was it?"

She hesitated, then after a moment said softly, "*Vdova* Nevskaya was missing from her new home this morning. Her children are crying."

Good God! Nevsky's widow! If this leads to the discovery that I've been sheltering the family, then it's good-bye to my feudal estate on the Volga! In this world, can one perform any decent act without regretting it?

Noon. This is turning into a busy day. The radio brings news that Hitler is dead at last. If only some Austrian nursemaid gifted with prophecy had strangled him in his crib, how much the whole world would have been spared!

He's being embalmed and his funeral is set for a week hence. So I'll have to go to Berlin. Dietrich was right — I can't afford not to, especially with this Müller business hanging over me. On the other hand, that will leave my people here with no defender when the SS descends on them like the Biblical iron besom of destruction.

One can only hope that the bloodletting in Berlin will begin very soon and distract the butchers from what is, after all, only a local crime.

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Later still. Marya reports that Müller's serfs have been arrested and are undergoing interrogation. Trying to distract their tormentors, they'll begin to accuse anybody and everybody. Those they name will be arrested and tortured, and so on and so on, until the entire district is depopulated. What will happen to the harvest now, God only knows.

Marya is helping me plan my trip. Lufthansa is putting on extra flights to Berlin, and a single phone call got me a first-class seat. I have four days before my flight takes off. I can only hope the Gestapo mars its hitherto perfect record of incompetence by finding the real murderer quickly — and that the killer's not one of my people!

With that off my mind, I could almost enjoy seeing Hitler off to Valhalla, or to Hell, whichever it may be.

8 September 1949. No fresh news about the murder, but arrests have begun in the serf-warrens outside the city. Everywhere the fear is palpable. I feel it too, although the danger's far greater for the Russians.

I rely on Marya more than ever to keep me informed. She tells me that the Nevsky children have been taken into other houses of the village. The prison at Kalach has been sealed off, and nobody knows what's happening inside, although one can easily guess.

The harvest is almost done. I was in the west field watching the mechanical reapers at work this morning when I was summoned back to the house to take a long-distance call from Dietrich. A special hundred-man Heroes' Farewell to our beloved leader is being planned for the small Memorial Chapel on the morning of the funeral. No doubt a Goebbels inspiration — a kind of Viking farewell to the supreme warlord. Through Dietrich's intervention, I'm to be one of the Heroes. The whole Nazi gang will be there to honor us — Bormann, Himmler, the younger generation like Eichmann.

I know Dietrich set this up because he's trying to save my neck, but sometimes I wish he wouldn't work so hard at it!

After the service, we'll leave the chapel and march at the head of the funeral cortege down the whole length of Adolf-Hitler-Allee to the Great Hall of the Reich, while the Berlin Philharmonic plays the slow movement from Beethoven's *Eroica.* Good thing the composer, who hated tyrants, won't be around to hear it!

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* * *

9 September 1949. Back in the townhouse. Let me try to be calm.

Eichmann is here in Führerburg. Local landowners were ordered to assemble today on one hour's warning at the Veteran Officers' Club.

There we were harangued by the Reich Protector — tall, sallow, clean-shaven, arrayed in black and silver like a pall draping a coffin. Unless rumor lies (and in these matters it seldom does) he was a key figure in butchering the Jews — nobody even tries to guess how many died in that *Aktion* — and is now engaged in liquidating some forty percent of the population of White Russia who have been judged to be "racially unworthy of existence."

His talk was brief and to the point. Himmler has ordered a drastic security clampdown throughout the Eastern Territories. Spots of rebellion are to be stamped out with utter ruthlessness. Obviously he fears that the news of Hitler's death will lead to violent outbreaks, perhaps even a Russian invasion, just at the time when Berlin is in turmoil over the succession.

"Particularly important [said Eichmann] in the Volga District is the liquidation and annihilation of the band led by the terrorist kingpin who calls himself the Ataman. Müller's murder has been traced to a peasant woman, but of course she did not gain access to this officer's guarded home all by herself! She is now undergoing rigorous interrogation. No doubt the Ataman thought to deceive us into believing the murder was merely a case of private vengeance. We're not as innocent as that!

"No, this was the opening of a campaign to destabilize German authority throughout the East. We National Socialists know how to deal with such threats! I remind you gentlemen of your duties in this regard. Every whisper of information is to be passed on to Gestapo headquarters at once. No shielding of pet serfs will be tolerated."

Fixing me with a raptor's eye as he said it. Nazi bluster but, as usual, real ferocity behind it. I was more shaken than I like to admit. The Nevskaya woman may not know that I ordered her and her brats to be hidden, but she certainly knows that Marya arranged it all, and if she talks —

And of course she'll talk.

Back in 1944, after the conspiracy against Hitler failed, Mannstein

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was so unfortunate as to be taken alive. Foolish of him, but I think he had religious qualms about committing suicide.

At the Club, years after the event, I heard an SS man describe what happened to him. They worked him over for a whole day and, in the evening, when he was weak and in great pain, they brought him a bucket with his daughter's head in it. At that he broke down completely and confessed to everything, for he had no more desire to live.

The creature who told this tale — loudly and drunkenly, while standing at the bar — gave a laugh at the end and said, like some burlesque Nazi in a BBC comedy skit, "We have ways, you see. We have ways."

Later. I drove to the estate, hoping to calm my spirit by watching the harvesters finish up their work. I was in the fields when a serf ran up and told me that in my absence a Gestapo car arrived in Führerburg and took my Marya away.

Later still. Drove like a madman to the serf-prison, but could not see her. Eichmann was there, I saw his big black Mercedes with his flag and his motorcycle escort lounging around. He wouldn't meet me, being — as a little *Unterstürmführer* said with an undisguised sneer — "busy."

Busy! I know how these people keep busy.

Midnight. Back at the townhouse. No word yet. I have the bottle of Scotch and my Luger lying on the table in front of me. I will not repeat Mannstein's mistake when they come for me. But *what is happening to Marya*?

I can only hope that she gave them everything and everyone to save herself pain. Tell them whatever they want to hear, my love, tell them I'm a Russian agent, tell them I'm Khrushchev in disguise, it doesn't matter. They will take nothing but my corpse, and to that they are welcome.

What is happening to her now?

10 September 1949. The call came at 0520. The ungodly like ungodly hours.

A gelid voice announced her death "in process of judicial interrogation." So that's what they call it now.

"You will be responsible for funeral arrangements," the voice continued. "The body must be collected today. Otherwise it will be cremated."

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Somehow I spoke coherently, though without feeling, the way one walks on frostbitten feet. "You're releasing her body, then?"

"The juridical process failed to reveal that she was involved in illegal activities or had knowledge of such activities."

His voice betrayed his disappointment. They were gunning for me, but I'm a pal of Dietrich Wallenstein, a big landowner, an official Hero of the Reich with two iron crosses and a knight's cross. To catch me, they needed evidence.

And Marya didn't talk. In spite of all their little ways, she didn't betray me.

Later. I have seen her body. That's why they returned it to me. They wanted me to see what they'd done to her.

Stupid of them. Do they think only they know how to kill?

Took the Porsche, drove to Gorodok. Typical run-down Russian village. The ruins of the priest's house haven't been cleaned up yet. I called the village elders together. They were out in the fields and took some time to arrive.

I waited, smoking American cigarettes. Hands quite steady. Now all compromises are over. I know what I'll do, provided I can get help to do it.

I'm leaving for Berlin tomorrow, so things will have to move fast. That worries me a bit. Things don't usually move fast in Russia.

Finally the elders showed up, two graybeards wearing boots and embroidered peasant smocks. Both looking like Rasputin. I explained what I needed. Obviously they knew all about Marya, and nodded silently when I promised to attend the proposed meeting anywhere, to come alone, and to carry no weapon.

They sent for vodka. However poor they are, they always have vodka. We drank, and I got it down without choking, though it was dreadful stuff. Home brew.

Then back to this house. Hand steady, I wrote out the key to my code, folded it into my journal. Think I'll sit up tonight, don't feel like sleeping. No tears, no prayers. Reread Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, which has always moved me greatly. It tells about the redemption, not of a hero, but of an ordinary mediocre man, when at last his evasions and pretenses come to an end.

* * *

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11 September 1949. A peasant lad guided me to a small patch of woods near Gorodok. I began to comprehend that this village must be the command center of the guerillas. No wonder the priest was burned!

Two rough-looking fellows confiscated the attaché case I was carrying, stared blankly at the manuscript inside it, then patted me down and led me deeper into the stands of birch and larch trees. The man I'd come to meet was sitting on a log, smoking. I noted that he too favors American cigarettes. Nice of Khrushchev to keep him supplied.

The Ataman is a small man but wiry and strong. Round head and black, thinning hair. Asiatic eyes.

"I asked Marya about you a couple of years ago," he began. "We're both Cossacks, you know. That's why I call myself Ataman, meaning head man. Once I asked her, 'What's this "good German" of yours really like?' She answered, 'He means well, but he's a man from whom truth is hidden.'"

"What truth?" I asked, feeling like Pontius Pilate.

"That you can't rid yourself of the guilt of your crimes as long as you continue to profit from them. That was what she told me, anyhow."

"My profiting is over. You have the sort of device I asked for?"

"Maybe. Anyway, I know what you're talking about. Things like that have been arriving lately. All the way from America, just like Mickey Mouse. Tell me how you plan to use it."

I explained about the Heroes' Farewell. "I'll be in a small chapel with them, the whole bunch of them. The Nazis who corrupted my people and butchered yours. It's a confined space and it'll make a fine gas chamber. When they realize what's happening, they'll rush the door, but it's narrow, so they'll get jammed in the opening. Some may get out, but not many."

He grunted. "At first I wasn't inclined to help you. We're not supposed to use the stuff for personal vengeance, only for political and military advantage. But if you can wipe out the whole leadership...well, that's about as political as you can get. This stuff is stronger than the old nerve gases, or so I'm told. About thirty times stronger. It's an American improvement. Americans are always making things better, aren't they? It's compressed into small containers. Open one and it rushes out, howling like one of those new jet planes coming right at you. You know how it kills?"

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"Yes."

"It's not a pleasant death."

"No."

"Why are you doing it? I suppose it's Marya, what they did to her."

"Yes."

"All those millions of dead, and the torture of one Cossack woman drives you to this."

"Yes. You know, she never betrayed me."

"In *The House of the Dead* Dostoevsky said, 'The people know how to suffer.' *She* knew how to suffer."

"Yes. Give me the stuff and let me go."

He stood up then and kissed me. I've never gotten used to this Russian custom. "May God receive you. I'm a Communist, and I shouldn't say things like that. But what the hell, when you find somebody who's decent, you have to treat him decently. Life isn't a walk across a field for any of us."

"No. *Pozhal'sta*, give me the stuff and let me go."

And so he did — a yellow cylinder about forty centimeters long, easily concealed. Obviously designed for use by terrorists. I have a thermos bottle that'll hold it nicely, if I remove the glass lining. I tried it in my new attaché case, and it fits.

To make room for it I had to take out this journal. "What's that?" the Ataman asked.

"Secrets the world may want to know. Or may not, I don't care. I want to make a last entry, about this meeting. It'll take me only a few minutes."

He nodded, and I sat down on the log beside him and began to write. Once I looked up and he was eyeing me oddly.

"What's wrong?"

"Just wondering what you've got to smile about."

I tried to tell him, but couldn't. To understand, he'd have to be here in this place where my soul stands at last. So close to the end, so close to the beginning.

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After Jim Cambias's tale of a plucky cargo ship, "Balancing Accounts," ran in our Feb. 2008 issue, we got a lot of inquiries about when Mr. Cambias would be writing a sequel. He hasn't answered that question yet, but in the meantime, he offers us this one, a very different sort of story that readers of all ages will enjoy. The title, he notes, was inspired by two of his five-year-old son's primary interests.

The Dinosaur Train

By James L. Cambias

SEAN SULLIVAN RODE THE Dinosaur Train for the last time in the summer of 1980. When the show got to Chicago, his father was waiting at the siding on 114th Street. Sean spotted the beige Chevy copcar sedan parked at the end of the line of local rented trucks. During one of the interminable delays while the railroad crew got the train into place and secured, Sean swung down from the beat-up old Pullman car the Sullivan Show staff rode in and trudged over to say hello.

"Hi! I thought I'd come help set up. Took the day off." His dad hugged him a little awkwardly, then looked at the train. "How's your grandpa?"

"He's okay."

"Good tour this year?"

"Pretty good, I think. Grandpa says the whole Olympics thing will help us. For a while it looked like the Anderson campaign might hire one of the dinos to send to Detroit for the Republican convention. You know, because Reagan's an old guy. But Grandpa turned them down."

"Not like him to pass up free publicity. Jeez, how long are those guys

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going to take? It must be roasting inside those boxcars by now. Want something to drink?" He reached into the car and handed Sean a can — it was plain white and said COLA in blue letters. It was warm and tasted funny, but he was thirsty and drank it.

"How's your mother?"

"She's okay. Another year till she gets her degree."

"What then?"

"I don't know. Whatever you do with a Ph.D. in Women's Studies."

"Teach Women's Studies, I guess. What about you? Have you started picking out colleges?"

"Yeah, some," said Sean.

The train men got the locomotive uncoupled and started to pull away. Barry, the crew chief, jumped down from the Pullman step and blew a long blast on his whistle. The Sullivan Show exploded into action. Roustabouts hustled over to the boxcars and started unlocking the doors and setting up the ramps. The rental trucks pulled up next to the car holding the tents and fencing.

Sean and his dad joined the trainers getting the animals out. As always, they started with Brenda. Sean's dad shook hands with some of the older crew who remembered him, then they both took up goads and stationed themselves at her flank for the difficult job of backing her up before she could go down the ramp.

Grandpa was up at her head, holding her bridle and crooning to her in his deepest voice. She was fidgety and uncomfortable after the overnight ride from St. Louis, and it took all his weight on the bridle to keep her from trying to lift her head. Other trainers might handle the other animals, but Brenda was the show's star attraction and Grandpa didn't trust anyone else to manage her properly.

Getting a seventy-ton sauropod out of a railroad boxcar was a slow and delicate operation. First Grandpa had to lead her forward until the other trainers could nudge her tail out of the open door on her left, then back her and turn her gently until her head was pointing out the right-hand door. Then he whistled. Sean and his dad poked her with their goads, and Brenda the Brachiosaurus lumbered out into the daylight. Grandpa released the head bridle and Brenda raised her head to her full forty-foot height.

Only then did Sean's grandfather come over to say hello. "Patrick!"

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he called out to Sean's father. "I didn't see you back here. Are you going to work the show?"

"I thought I'd come help with set-up, anyway."

"Glad to have you. God, what a pit this is," he said, looking at the grimy industrial landscape around the siding. "I remember when we'd pull right into Union Station downtown and parade to Soldier Field. Now we're in this Godforsaken slum. I had to hire security guards so that decent people wouldn't be afraid to come down."

The first of the rented trucks trundled out to the show site by Lake Calumet. Brenda stood placidly, enjoying the (relatively) fresh air while the trainers got the hadrosaurs and the styracosaur out of their cars. The forklift dropped off the crate holding Brenda's parade costume and the three Sullivans set to work putting it on her.

She stood calmly while they raised the ladders and put the harness over her body before attaching the draperies. The row of spines down the center of her back made it hard to get the leather-padded steel cables in place, but once in position they couldn't slide around at all.

Her caparison was canvas covered with green silk. Letters of gold braid two feet high spelled out "BRENDA: 8th WONDER OF THE WORLD! SULLIVAN'S DINOSAURS" on her vast sides. Sean's grandfather tapped Brenda's foreleg and shouted "Ho!" in his deepest voice. After a moment, she lowered her head so they could get the plumes onto her.

"Do you still have the electric outfit?" Sean's father asked when Brenda was all rigged out.

"Yeah," said Grandpa. "Still works. Changing the bulbs is hell, but she does look good. You'll see it at the opening tonight."

When all twelve dinos were in costume, Grandpa checked his watch and smiled. "Noon exactly. Just in time for the parade. Let's get moving."

Sean had seen old films and photos of the Sullivan Show's dinosaur parades in past decades. The greatest was the famous shot of twenty dinosaurs marching up Broadway in 1948 — the twin brachiosaurs Brenda and Bob in the lead with a twelve-year-old Patrick Sullivan riding proudly on Brenda's shoulders and a dozen war orphans in the howdah on her back.

No more howdah, what with the cost of insurance. But Sean pulled on the old green-and-gold uniform which reeked of mothballs and put the horrible old turban on his head before mounting. There was a spot at the

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base of her neck where three of her back spines were sawed down to make room for a saddle.

Brenda wasn't really much fun to ride — she was just too damned big. A skilled rider could actually control the hadrosaurs and iguanodons with reins and spurs, but on Brenda's neck Sean was just a passenger, waving at the crowd and grinning while Grandpa steered her by tapping her forelegs with the goad.

The pickup truck at the back of the line had a loudspeaker mounted on top of the cab. It gave off a blare of static, and then started to play the old Johnny Cash song "Dinosaur Train." In his scrapbook Grandpa had a photo of Cash posing next to Brenda at Opryland. The inscription read, "To M.S. from J.C. — Keep the Dino Train rolling!" Grandpa took that as legal permission to use the song without paying royalties. So far nobody had complained.

Led by a Chicago Police cruiser and a truck from the power company, the dinosaur parade headed down the block to 115th, then turned east. A sparse crowd of old white people and young black people watched Sullivan's Dinosaurs go past. Sean noticed that the very oldest and the very youngest watched with unconcealed delight. It was the same in all the cities they'd visited.

Grandpa got Brenda to lower her head so she could pass under the highway overpass, then the parade entered the show site. It was a former freightyard — a huge expanse of pavement with waist-high weeds growing in the cracks, surrounded by chain-link fence topped with razor wire.

The temporary corral for the smaller dinos was ready when they arrived, and the trainers led them in. Brenda stayed near the main site gate, right next to the big "SULLIVAN'S DINOSAURS" banner. She'd been the show's best advertisement since she was ten years old, and Grandpa wasn't going to waste that, not with a hundred cars a minute going by on I-94.

Sean got out of costume and rolled Brenda's drinking trough over to where she stood. The oddly colored water of Lake Calumet lapped at the bottom of the rusty fence, but Grandpa had arranged for a water truck to supply the dinos.

"Come on, girl, drink it," Sean called to her. She just stood there, head up, ignoring the water and the pile of hay. "Well, it's here if you want it," said Sean, and checked her leg shackle. The ankle chain was attached to

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a block of concrete. Personally Sean doubted it would hold Brenda if she really wanted to go someplace else, but fifty years of habit was harder for her to break.

Sean's father came over to admire Brenda. "Got all the electricals set up. I keep telling your grandfather he needs to hire some real electricians. Those jerks couldn't change a light bulb without electrocuting themselves. How's my big girl?"

"She's a little off her feed today. Probably the heat," said Sean.

"Are you giving her enough water? Of course you are. Dumb question. Listen, I spoke with the boss and he's willing to let you come have lunch with me tomorrow before the afternoon show."

Sean hesitated. Visits to his father were always squirmingly uncomfortable affairs — but the chance to eat something that wasn't concession-stand hot dogs or diner take-out was very tempting. And after all, it was just for lunch. "Great," he said.

SHOWTIME ON THE FIRST DAY was six o'clock. Cars started pulling into the lot at four-thirty. Sean helped direct traffic in the parking area until half past five, then went to the trailer he shared with his grandfather to get into his costume.

His grandpa was outside the trailer when he got there, cooking something in a big pot over a fire of scrap lumber and newspapers. It smelled vile. Grandpa kept tasting it and tossing in handfuls of leaves from a crumpled paper bag.

"What's that?" Sean asked.

"It's a tonic for Brenda. She's been looking droopy."

"What's in it?"

"Oh, a little of this, a little of that. Pine balsam, tea leaves, lettuce, lemongrass, burdock, and ten six-packs of Dr. Pepper."

"Does it work?"

"Of course it works! I've been using this stuff since the thirties. I got the recipe from Harry Raven for five dollars after we spent a night drinking at McSorley's. Harry was on both of Merian Cooper's expeditions to Tengkorak Island. He said it was the only thing that kept the dinos from getting seasick on the way to San Francisco. This'll settle her stomach."

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Mike Sullivan added another handful of leaves and mopped his forehead. "Let it cook a little longer. Go tell Jackie she's going to be doing the balancing act with Mr. Duckbill instead of Brenda."

"It's more impressive with Brenda."

"Tell me something I don't know. Relax — a couple of gallons of this stuff after the show and a good night's sleep and Brenda will be fine. Any TV trucks tonight?"

"Not a one."

"God damn them. I sent every TV station in Chicago a set of free tickets and a press packet. They could at least show up."

Sean tasted the dinosaur medicine and made a face. "Say, Grandpa: there's a bunch of scientists here — at the museums and the colleges and stuff. Maybe you could ask them for advice about Brenda."

"No! No scientists! They're all like *that* with those crooks at the Smithsonian." He waved his crossed fingers in Sean's face. "If they find out Brenda's sick, pretty soon we'll have Wildlife and Fisheries people all over us, checking up on how we're caring for these *endangered animals*. They've been trying to steal my herd since the sixties."

"But what if she doesn't get better?"

"She's gonna be fine. I know more about taking care of dinos than anyone else on Earth. Especially those pinheads at the Smithsonian. Have you seen Johnnie?"

"Not today."

"Go find him and make sure he's awake and in costume. Dumb sonofabitch needs to remember that this is a show and not his private tour of every piece of high-school tail in America."

Sean blushed at that. Johnnie was a couple of years older than he was, and his ability to talk to girls and persuade them to go back to his trailer inspired Sean's admiration and envy. Sean himself was kind of old-fashioned about girls, and his grandfather's strict curfew was actually something of a relief.

The show began on time — Sean's grandfather had a horror of starting late, especially on opening night. At the stroke of six the speaker system kicked in with "Dinosaur Train" and the animals began their parade into the floodlit space between the bleachers.

First came the trikes, Tina and Tony, followed by last year's hatchlings,

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now three feet high at the shoulder and utterly adorable. Then the three hadrosaurs with streamers fluttering from their crests and girls in leopard-skin bikinis riding on their backs. Then Andrew the ankylosaur, escorted by four trainers with electric prods. Alice the allosaur showing her genuinely terrifying teeth — Grandfather refused to muzzle her for the show, instead making sure to feed her fifty pounds of dog chow and butcher's offal half an hour before showtime; the chief problem was keeping her awake.

Johnnie the ringmaster announced them as they entered. Then the lights dimmed and the music switched to *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. "And finally, prepare yourselves to be astonished, prepare to be struck with awe, as the Sullivan Dinosaur Show is proud to present! Our star attraction! The largest creature ever to walk the Earth! The Eighth Wonder of the World! BRENDA the BRACHIOSAURUS!"

Sean could feel how slowly Brenda was moving. It wasn't even her usual walking gait — Grandpa and the other trainers had to nudge each foot along to keep her going. It seemed to take forever for her to move into the arena. When her front foot hit the spray-painted mark on the concrete, Sean flipped the switch on her caparison and Brenda blazed with a thousand green and white bulbs. The crowd cheered, small children cried, and the show began.

Back in the Thirties, all Grandpa had needed to do was let people look at his dinos. By the Fifties he added some circus acts, and now in 1980 the show included a laser light display, disco music, a man in an explorer costume doing magic tricks while riding one of the triceratopses, a dance number by the girls, a motorcycle jump over five dinosaurs, and the baby trikes racing around a fenced track to the tune of a speeded-up *William Tell* Overture.

Amid all the glitz the dinos still did their turns; the hadrosaurs could do half a dozen stunts. An alert viewer would have noticed that the ankylosaur and the allosaur just stood around tethered to ringbolts set in the pavement. Alice was known to snap at fast-moving mammals even when she did have a full belly, and Andy was so damned stupid that standing in one place eating heads of cabbage was his best trick.

Brenda normally took a major part in the show. Jackie would pirouette atop her head forty feet above the ground, and Grandpa would pick

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children from the audience to come down and form a human chain as long as Brenda. Tonight she just stood at one end of the arena, looming impressively but doing nothing.

Sullivan's Dinosaur performances always ended with a chorus of dino music from the hadros, trikes, and Brenda. Tonight Mr. Duckbill and his two females gave their glorious French horn calls while Tony and Tina made their odd high-pitched cries. But the bone-vibrating infrasound of Brenda's song was missing. Only when the dinos fell silent and the applause swelled did she bend her long neck forward from the shoulder, as if taking a bow. Then she vomited twenty gallons of Dr. Pepper and cooked lettuce onto the pavement.

Brenda was no better the next morning. Grandpa Sullivan and two of the other trainers were trying to get her to drink more potion as Sean waited by the gate for his father. It was far too late to call and cancel, and it would make everything more complicated if his father knew the dinosaur was sick. So when the beige copcar slowed to turn in at the gate, Sean ran out and got the door open before his father could even pull off the paved road.

"Restaurant okay? It's too far to go all the way back to my place. There's a pretty good cafeteria up on Fifty-Third." He got the car back into traffic, then asked, "How's the boss?"

"He's okay."

"Seriously? I worry about him. He's too old to be on the road in this heat."

"Nobody else can run the show."

"Because his only son shirked his duty and ran off to be an electronics engineer. I've heard it. Which reminds me — what colleges are you applying to?"

"I'm not going to college," said Sean.

"Oh, really? Does your mother know about this?"

"She says I should trust my heart."

His father made a noise. "How about using your head? What'll you do if you don't go to college?"

"I want to work at the Dino Park. Grandpa says I can start full-time next summer."

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"So you can spend the rest of your life shoveling hadrosaur manure and eating State Fair midway food? That's crazy, Sean."

"No it isn't. It's, like, the family business."

"You've been listening to your grandfather too much." They left the car in a pay lot and walked to the Valois Cafeteria. A large sign proclaimed SEE YOUR FOOD! Even though they were early for lunch, the place was already filling up, and they had to wait holding their trays while a table full of Chicago police finished up.

His father didn't try to compete with a teenage appetite, and ate his own meal silently while Sean tore through a big plate of chicken pot pie, macaroni, and beet salad. But just when Sean began to hope they could let the subject drop, his father resumed the conversation. "Look, Sean, this isn't an either-or choice. If you go to college you'll have more options. You might find something else you want to do."

"I know what I want to do! I want to work with the dinos! And when I've learned enough I can take over running things and Grandpa can retire. That's a pretty good career right there."

"I read the business pages — ask your grandfather how long he's going to be able to afford to go on touring. This could be the last year. The railroads are all going containerized. You'll be stuck at the park in Florida, running a glorified alligator farm."

"Well, so what? I'll keep it going somehow. I can carry on the tradition. Expand the park, maybe. Dinosaurs live a long time — maybe my grandkids will take over when I get too old."

His father finished a piece of pie, and when he spoke again his voice was softer. "Sean, everything changes. Even the dinos. Sure, Brenda could live another hundred years — or she could drop dead tomorrow. You weren't born when Bob died. He was about a year old when your grandfather bought him, already as big as a cow. God, he was a magnificent animal. At the end he was bigger than Brenda. Eighty tons and fifty feet high at the top of his head."

"I saw some of the movies Grandpa made."

"They don't do Bob justice. When he gave his call it made windows rattle all over the county. He was the biggest animal on Earth. And then some damned drunk idiot in Cleveland threw a firecracker at his feet during the parade. Bob bolted, tripped over a car, and fell down. Broke his

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leg and six ribs. Did your grandfather ever tell you about trying to move Bob? That was a nightmare. We had four cranes for the job, and when they lifted him he screamed. You've never heard a dino scream. It was like the door to Hell opened up."

Sean shuddered.

"Your grandfather and I rode in the boxcar with Bob all the way back to Florida, but we knew he was dying. Pneumonia. When we got back to the Dinosaur Park there were three carloads of biologists from Yale and the Smithsonian waiting for us. Your grandfather wanted to chase them off, but I talked him into letting them help. They tried antibiotics — they were still new back then and nobody knew the right dosage for a full-grown bull brachiosaurus."

"Grandpa says they were just waiting to cut him up."

"Oh, probably they were. Nobody had ever gotten the chance to dissect a large sauropod. Tengkorak Island was already off-limits by then, so Brenda and Bob were the only brachiosaurs in captivity. The scientists were desperate to get samples before Bob spoiled. It was pretty gruesome. They used big butcher knives and pruning saws to cut through Bob's hide. I remember there was one guy over in the corner with an electric grindstone, just sharpening knives all night while they worked. Everybody went for a different piece, depending on their scientific specialty. They were cutting out organs and muscles and dropping them in big tubs of iced formaldehyde. Even so, the liver and intestines rotted before they could get them out. You never smelled anything so bad in your life."

"Was the creek really full of blood?"

"It was everywhere. Tons of blood — literally, tons of it. All around the carcass the ground turned to red mud a foot deep. After the museum people got the bones cut free there was nothing but a big pile of rotting meat, so we just got a couple of truckloads of fill dirt and some sod and buried him where he was. Your grandfather kept some of the hide — I remember he tried to find someone interested in making dinosaur-skin boots or bags, but it was too thick for that. We wound up slicing it into rectangles and silk-screening a picture of Bob onto each one. There's probably still a couple of hundred in one of the old trailers."

Sean looked at the wall clock. "I need to get back."

"Sure. Let's go."

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* * *

Sean spent part of the next morning standing on a ladder, running a metal detector over Brenda's abdomen to see if she'd swallowed anything.

"Any luck?" his grandfather called up.

"Nothing. Can this really work through something as big as her?"

"Oh, sure. Why do you think I have it? Happens once or twice on each tour — dino gets a pop top or a bucket handle or something. Sometimes some of these no-good kids will put a nail or a razor blade in an apple."

"So what do we do if I find anything?"

"If it's at the crop or in the gullet, get her to throw up again until it comes out. If it's back in the intestines — get the hose."

"What?"

"Give her an enema! Flush out her insides!"

"Jesus," said Sean.

It took him more than an hour to work the metal detector over both sides of Brenda, and the search turned up nothing. They put the ladder away, then Grandpa Sullivan led Sean back to the trailer and got out the big pot.

"C'mere and help me with this batch. If you're going to be taking care of the dinos, you'd better know how to make it."

"She just threw it up last time. We've got to do something, Grandpa."

"I am doing something. This'll fix her right up. It's never failed."

"Maybe she's got an infection, or she's egg-bound, or — "

"She passed an egg just the other day. Her chest sounds fine, her crap was normal before she quit eating, and her eyes are the right color."

"Is there anyone you could get to help?" Sean was thinking of his father, but didn't want to mention him directly.

His grandfather snorted. "I tried calling up some guys I know at Sinclair — figured maybe they could use a little nice publicity, helping save a sick dino. Ship her back to the Park and go on with the tour. Nothing. Cheap Mormon bastards. The ads with Bob and Brenda *made* that company. They'd be nothing but a two-bit gas station chain without Sullivan's Dinosaurs. Hell, the stupid dino on their signs used to be *green*, for God's sake!"

"What about — "

"No! I said no scientists and I mean no scientists. They don't know

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squat anyway. Most of 'em weren't even born when Mr. Cooper went to Tengkorak. Now why don't you stop yakking and help get this batch of tonic ready?"

So Sean helped chop lettuce and open Dr. Pepper cans while his grandfather stirred the mix. The matinee began at the stroke of noon, and this time Brenda vomited it all up as she made her entrance.

SEAN WENT to get takeout for the crew from a fried-chicken place in a scary-looking neighborhood at Halsted and 102nd Street. The chicken cooks and cashier were sealed off from the customers by inch-thick bulletproof plexiglass, and the food came through a kind of rotating airlock. While he was waiting for them to finish putting together fifty orders he dropped a quarter into the pay phone by the door.

"Dad?"

"Hello, Sean! I didn't expect to hear from you so soon. Everything all right?"

"I'm not sure." He looked around to see if anyone was listening. "The big girl is sick."

"Brenda? How sick?"

"Hasn't eaten or drunk anything since we got on the train in Saint Louis."

"That doesn't sound good. Has the boss been giving her that damned tonic?"

"She couldn't keep it down."

"Probably a mercy. He used to dose me with that when I was a kid. What can I do to help?"

"I don't know. He won't let me call anyone at the Field Museum because he's afraid the Smithsonian people will hear about it and take the herd."

"They wouldn't know much anyway — the only dinos they've got are fossils. Other than your grandfather the only people who know much about keeping dinos healthy are the vets at the Smithsonian preserve at Front Royal, and the Disney people in Anaheim."

"Do you have phone numbers for anyone?"

"I can get them."

"I'll call you back after tonight's show."

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"Sean — if you'd like, I could make the calls and explain the problem. It would save trouble with your grandfather. He gave up on me when I realized I like designing circuits better than shoveling dino dung."

Sean thought about it for a couple of seconds. "No, I'll do it. If they've got any ideas I can try them out on Brenda."

His father started to argue, then stopped himself. "Okay. Call me when you get the chance — don't worry about waking me up."

Sean ate fried chicken with the crew and helped get things ready for the evening show. His grandfather drafted him to help give Brenda an enema, but even after her colon was flushed out for half an hour she still wouldn't eat.

Mike Sullivan was getting desperate. He kept Brenda out of that evening's show and kept thumbing through his reference books — a very beat-up and much-annotated copy of *Reptile Keeper's Handbook* and a Depression-era WPA guide to chicken-raising. Sean even noticed a rosary on his grandfather's bunk when he went to the trailer to change for the show.

With no dinosaur to ride, Sean served as a spare trainer, feeding the ankylosaur cabbages during the show and trying not to spook the beast. He passed the time thinking about some of the things his father had said.

Did he really want to spend his life with the show? Most of the crew were short-timers, making one or two tours before moving on to something else. Johnnie the ringmaster was going back to college in the fall, with plans to go into television. There were a couple of veterinary students among the trainers, and all the laborers were only hired by the season anyway. Ironically, it was only the hard-bitten old carny types who came back every year.

Andy snuffled and Sean handed him another cabbage. He watched the beast take the whole thing into its mouth and chew on it like a baseball player with a wad of tobacco. This was the part he liked best — not the frantic activity of setup and breakdown, not the forced enthusiasm of the performance. Just being with the dinosaurs.

As soon as the beasts were secured for the night, Sean borrowed one of the pickup trucks and went in search of a pay phone. There was a single phone at the show site, a temporary line to the ticket office. When the office was closed, Grandpa unplugged the phone unit and kept it under his

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bunk. "Or else every deadbeat on the crew's going to be making long-distance calls on my nickel as soon as my back is turned."

He wound up at an all-night currency exchange on King Drive, where he had to wait for a man to finish a long and apparently emotionally devastating conversation in Spanish before he could get at the pay phone. His father answered on the second ring.

"Okay, here's what I've got. These are reasonably current — I heard from the Smithsonian last year when they wanted to see about trading breeding stock. The boss wouldn't hear of it, of course. Got a pencil?"

Sean scribbled down names and phone numbers in a free souvenir dinosaur coloring book left over from the 1974 tour. "Okay, thanks. Do you think I should wait till tomorrow to call?"

"No, do it now. If Brenda's not getting any better you don't want to waste any more time."

"Right. Thanks, Dad."

"The boss is going to blow a fuse when he finds out about this, you know. If you need a place to stay give me a call."

"Thanks."

He changed a ten-dollar bill into quarters and made his first call: James O'Reilly, in Front Royal, Virginia. No answer. The next name had a phone number which was the same except for the last digit, so Sean figured these were all office numbers. He stared glumly at a poster warning of the dangers of catching herpes from unprotected sex, then fed his quarters back into the phone and called Information. There was a residential listing for a James O'Reilly in Front Royal. Was midnight too late to call someone at home? Probably.

He put more quarters in the phone and dialed the number. After the fifth ring he was sure it was too late, and was about to give up when a hoarse voice said "Hello?"

"Is this Dr. O'Reilly of the National Dinosaur Center?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"I'm sorry to wake you. My name's Sean Sullivan. I'm with the Sullivan Dinosaur show. We've been having some trouble with our sauropod and I was wondering if you've seen anything like this in your herd."

"Just a moment." He could hear a lamp click on and a sleepy protest from someone in the background at the other end. "Your sauropod?"

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"A brachiosaurus. Brenda the brachiosaurus. She's forty-seven years old, one of the original batch from Tengkorak Island. We're on tour in Chicago right now, and for the past couple of days she's been sick. She won't eat or drink anything, and just stands there. She throws up everything we give her. We've already checked for any foreign objects in her gut, and she's not egg-bound." He tried to keep from sounding scared and desperate.

"Could be a virus. They can jump from one species to another, and in their native habitat dinosaurs don't get exposed to many diseases. We think that's one reason for the population decline on Tengkorak since the war. Especially from birds — was your animal at a state fair when she got sick?"

"No, we were in Saint Louis, at the speedway. The fair circuit doesn't really begin for another month."

"It might even be a human virus, then."

"Yeah, well, I'm not really worried about where she got it. I'd like to know what I can do to help her get better. She's not drinking and I'm afraid she's going to get dehydrated or something."

"That is a concern, although fortunately dinosaurs seem to be able to go without drinking much longer than most mammals."

"Dr. O'Reilly, I know all that. My family's been raising dinosaurs for fifty years." There was a clicking noise on the line and Sean fed a couple more quarters into the phone. "Have you seen anything like this at NDC, and what works to treat it?"

"Let me consult with the rest of the veterinary staff and see what we can come up with. I'll call you in the morning — what would be a good time?"

"Any time after nine." Sean gave him the ticket office number. "Be sure to ask for Sean."

He hardly slept that night, and gave up trying by six. To pass the time he went on the big early-morning coffee-and-donut run, then did his usual chores — clearing dung with the little Cat mini-loader, and putting out fresh bales of fodder for the animals. The dinos didn't eat grass or grains, so the Sullivan show bought up waste produce from supermarkets, bags of peat moss, truckloads of pine needles, and whatever leafy odds and ends the advance men could find at garden shops and landscaping companies.

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Once the ticket office opened he spent as much time as possible loitering nearby, but his grandfather didn't like loiterers on his crew, even family members who weren't getting paid. So Sean was packed off to help clean up the concession area, and he was still scraping gum off the pavement when he heard someone call his name.

He sprinted back to the ticket office, but wasn't fast enough. When Sean reached the door of the trailer his grandfather was already on the phone. "*Sean* Sullivan? Who? O'Reilly? No, this is *Michael* Sullivan, the owner, and — "

"That's for me, Grandpa," said Sean.

His grandfather passed him the receiver but stood there glaring while Sean took the call.

"It sounds as if your sauropod has a spleen infection. At least, the symptoms match what the Disney iguanodons had last spring. They lost one animal, but the rest responded well to Furazolidone injections."

"That's a medicine?"

"An antibiotic."

"Would it be available around here?"

"Chicago? Certainly. But if you're concerned about that I could send you some from our supply. That brachiosaur of yours is too important an animal to risk."

"That would be great, but — I don't know if we can afford it."

"Consider it a gift. I'll send out the Furazolidone by Federal Express; can you pick it up at the Field Museum?"

"Absolutely," said Sean.

"Good. Oh, and I'd like to arrange for someone to stop by for a follow-up. What's your tour schedule?"

Sean gave him a list of cities and dates and hung up the phone, then spoke to his grandfather clearly and calmly. "That was Dr. O'Reilly at the Smithsonian. They think Brenda's got a spleen infection which killed one of the Disney herd last year. He's sending out some antibiotics."

Sean hadn't really noticed how much taller than his grandfather he was until the old man stood face-to-face with him. Mike's fists were clenched and his face was bright red. "You dumb son of a bitch! What the hell were you thinking? Those bastards are going to close us down! Take the dinos! How could you be so stupid?"

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"Brenda's sick, Grandpa. Your home remedies weren't working." Sean kept his voice even.

That only seemed to make his grandfather angrier. "You don't know anything! If you take their charity you owe them something!"

"He didn't want anything. They're just going to send someone out to follow up."

"Follow up! I built this show with my own two hands and now you're giving it away — those bastards are going to take us over bit by bit. Whose side are you on?"

"I'm on Brenda's side! I'm not going to let her die just because you're too stubborn to ask for help!"

"This is still my God-damned show, and no good-for-nothing kid is going to tell me what to do!"

"You're not going to *have* a show if Brenda dies!"

"Get out of here. You're off the show. If you're not off these premises in ten minutes I'll get some of the boys to throw you out."

SEAN DRAGGED his suitcase to a gas station on King Drive and called his father. He considered trying to go it alone, working odd jobs to pay for a bus ticket, that kind of thing, but it was hot and he only had eleven dollars in his pocket.

On the drive back to the northwest suburbs he related what had happened. When he finished, his father asked him, "So now what?"

"I don't know. I guess I have to go home now."

"What about Brenda?"

"He's probably going to keep giving her that stupid tonic until she collapses."

"What about the antibiotics?"

"I'm supposed to pick them up tomorrow morning at the museum. But what good will that do if I'm barred from the show?"

"I'll get you in; don't worry."

Almost exactly twenty-four hours later, Sean sat in the back seat of his father's car as they approached the gate of the show site. Beside him on the seat were an insulated cooler of antibiotics and a box of cattle

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syringes newly bought at a veterinary supply store. Sean had been amused to see that they sold Furazolidone as well. "Probably cheaper than what the Smithsonian pays, too," his father had commented.

Barry was working the front gate, and unlocked it as soon as he recognized Sean's father. He came over to the driver's side as the window slid down. "Hey, Pat. You know the boss doesn't want that one coming back."

"The boss doesn't know what he's talking about, and I'm going to tell him that. We've got medicine here for the big girl."

Barry took off his cap and wiped his bare head. "Tell you what: I'm gonna go take a leak now and if you sneak in it's your fault, okay?"

"Thanks, Barry."

The car bumped over the cracked pavement to Brenda's pen. Grandpa and the other trainers were there draping wet towels on Brenda's neck. He saw them pull up but ignored them until they were standing at the foot of his ladder.

"I see a couple of trespassers," he said loudly. "They'd better get off the premises before I call the police."

"Dad, we've got the antibiotics for Brenda," said Sean's father. "You and the others had better get clear; she could startle when we give her the shot."

"I don't think you heard me," said Grandpa.

Sean's father ignored him. "The inside of the leg, as high up as you can reach. Just jam it in as fast as you can."

Sean took the big syringe and approached Brenda. His grandfather bellowed at the other trainers, then began climbing down when nobody moved to do anything.

Sean stood underneath Brenda. Her immense rib cage was just above his head, flexing slowly with each breath. He went to her left front leg so he could climb up on the shackle for a little extra height.

A hand grabbed his arm. It was his grandfather. "I told you to leave!"

"This is for Brenda, Grandpa."

His grandfather made a grab for the syringe, but then he in turn was grappled from behind by Sean's father. Sean pulled free and stabbed the syringe into Brenda's leg just behind the knee. He shoved the plunger home and pulled out the needle.

"There!" he said. "The note says two shots a day for the next two weeks."

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Sean's father let go of his grandfather and the three of them stood there a moment. Mike Sullivan glared at the two of them. Finally he took a deep breath. "Patrick, don't you ever lay hands on me again until you're dressing my corpse."

"As long as you leave my son alone."

"Now I want the two of you to get out."

"Brenda needs the medicine, Grandpa."

The old man breathed heavily for a moment, then shook his head. He wasn't red-faced any more; he looked tired and sad. "Oh, hell. Leave it. I'll give her the shots. Twice a day?"

"Morning and night."

"I'll do it. Now get out of here. Don't come back."

Sean and his father sat in the beige car and watched the Sullivan's Dinosaurs crew loading the train after the Sunday afternoon show. The locomotive was hooked up and idling, the boxcars packed, the trailers on the flatcars, and the smaller dinos in their stock cars. Grandpa led Brenda into her boxcar last of all. She still moved slowly, but finally she was in the car with her food and water handy by her head. They could see her drinking as he latched the door.

The Dinosaur Train pulled out on the way to Milwaukee. Sean's dad waved goodbye to it. Sean slumped in the passenger seat until the train was out of sight.

On the drive to the bus station, he turned to his father. "I thought Grandpa would change his mind after we got the medicine."

"Because you were right? That's one thing he never forgives."

"*Never*?"

"Not anytime soon, that's for sure."

They drove in silence for a time, then Sean asked, "Is it too late for me to send in my application? To college?"

"I'm not sure. You might have to start classes in January. Changed your mind?"

"I want to talk to Dr. O'Reilly again. I want to find out what major would be best if I want to get a job at the Dinosaur Center. If Grandpa's right, they're going to need someone who knows how to take care of Brenda."

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CURIOSITIES

THE BIG BALL OF WAX: A STORY OF TOMORROW'S HAPPY WORLD, BY SHEPHERD MEAD (1954)

IN THE twenty-first century, Lanny Martin dictates a memory-tape report of that awful week back in 1993 when the XP machine nearly destroyed civilization. The XP machine tape-records any human activity (yes, including *that* one), then plays it back so that anyone else can relive the same experience. And you can turn up the volume.

Martin works for ConChem, the glutcorp that owns everything ...except the XP machine and its tapes. But nobody buys things anymore, except the bare nutrients required for survival. XP tapes of gourmet meals and other sensual activities are now outselling the actual experiences. Eventually, Martin saves ConChem's profit line...by acquiring XP, then using its technology to offer free *samples* of whatever people want. To get the full experience, they'll have to pay.

Shepherd Mead's future year 1993 is semi-plausible. Remember those picture-phones which every 1960s oracle predicted would arrive soon? Mead's future world has them, with one (very convincing) addition explaining why they never caught on in our own timeline. Mead's other predictions are less impressive. Lanny Martin drives a 1992 Buick to Idyllwild (sic) Airport, and he encounters "a colored fellow."

Shepherd Mead (1914-1994) joined an ad agency as the mailroom boy, and left two decades later as their vice president; this experience inspired his best-seller *How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying*. He also wrote the 1965 SF novel *The Carefully Considered Rape of the World*.

— F. Gwynplaine MacIntyre

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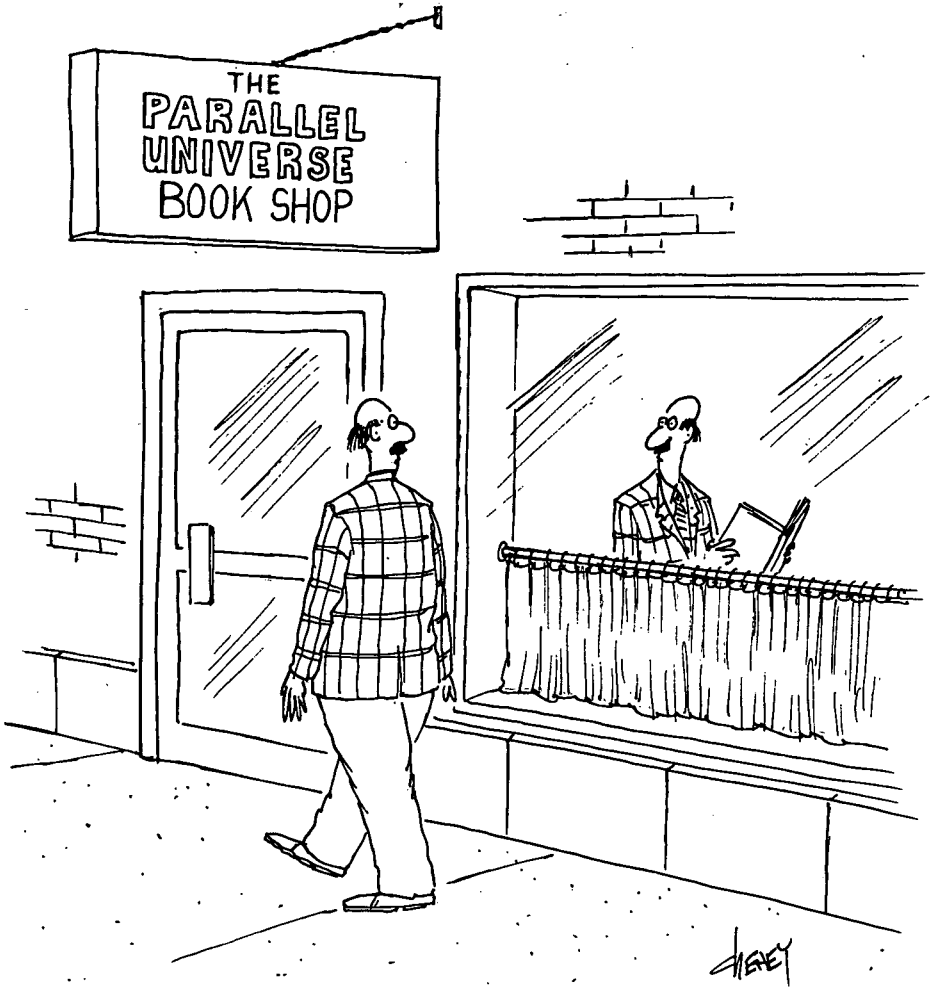

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